

THE ABYSS LOOKS BACK

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It was Ellie Chase, the receptionist at my office, who told me the Town Hall was gone. The day, I remember, was a bit drizzly in the morning and then became unusually hot by mid-afternoon, the few clouds having fled the sky.

"Have you heard?" Ellie said as I stopped inside the door to take off my raincoat.

She handed me a clipboard listing the morning appointments and stood waiting. Each name on the list was followed by succinct notes defining the patient's complaint; I assumed that her question involved someone on the list and looked for the unusual.

"The Town Hall is missing," she said.

I grunted something inarticulate, turning the top sheet to examine the second page of her list. *May 21, 10:30AM: Mrs. Anne Ellison, headache/stomach upset/chills.* Sometimes I swear Ellie notes the effect a patient's visit is likely to have on me, rather than symptoms the patient reports.

She asked if I'd heard what she said. "The Town Hall," she repeated, "is missing. The Mayor's secretary went to work this morning and it wasn't there. There's just a hole in the ground, and the front steps and the ramp for people in wheelchairs."

"You're saying the *building* is gone?" I said, assuming that I must have missed something.

Ellie nodded. "And they can't find the Mayor, either."

I have known my receptionist since she was a precociously intelligent child in elementary school. Now twenty-eight, married to a very practical auto mechanic named Pete Chase and the devoted mother of twin seven-year-old girls, she was not given to bizarre jokes. The problem, whatever it was, was real.

Nonetheless, I said what anyone would say: "Ellie, that's crazy."

And so it was. But I went to my desk and called the Mayor's Office anyway. Nothing. No ringing, no Donna Lombardi saying

"Mayor's Office," no busy signal. My call vanished as if it had spilled out the end of a cut phone line. Next I called the Police Department, also housed in the Town Hall. Nothing. I began to sweat a little, and loosened my tie. The Town Clerk? Clerk of Courts? I called every office likely to have someone in it at eight a.m. The silence was total. I called Dan Barry.

The Fire Chief works out of one of our two fire houses, just a block from my office. I was relieved to hear my call go through. It was answered on the third ring.

"Fire Department, Massey," a voice said.

"Tom, it's Ed Miller," I said. "Is Dan in?"

"No, Doc, he's at the Town Hall," Massey replied. "I mean, where it... you know."

I had the awful feeling that I did know. I thanked Massey and suggested that he call me any time if he needed to, if he wasn't feeling well. I wondered if there was enough pharmaceutical calm in the town's three drug stores for everyone who might soon need a prescription.

Ellie was on the phone and nodded when I told her I was going out.

"I'm canceling today's appointments," she said. "I'll call Rhonda, too."

Rhonda Taylor was my office nurse. Ellie would tell her the day's schedule was cleared, and then go home to be with Pete and the kids. It was shaping up as that kind of day.

I walked the four tree-shaded residential blocks between the office and Town Hall in a steadily growing crowd, as people left their homes to see if what they'd heard could be true. They were dressed for work in offices, fast food places, garages. The kids had their backpacks on, racing each other to the site instead of dawdling on their way to school. One woman was in her bathrobe and slippers. Many drank coffee or ate breakfast as they walked, toast and egg sandwiches and bagels. It might have seemed festive, except for the concern on the adult faces. There was surprisingly little conversation.

The truth of the matter was clear from the moment I reached the corner of Bell and Main. Looking east, a shocking expanse of brightening sky, already almost entirely cloudless, met my eyes. The Town Hall, three stories high, should have been there instead. Odd grunting sounds and short, sharp cries erupted as people stepped out onto Main and gaped at the void where the building had been. Up ahead, the rotating lights of what looked to be every car in the Police Department fleet flashed as men and women in blue waved the crowd back from the edge of the hole, the voices of excited children sparking and darting in the air. News vans from a

number of nearby cities were clustered farther down the street, behind sawhorses and another line of police.

Dan Barry was talking with three of his firemen by the front steps, now just steps, I supposed, deprived as they were of anything to front. The scene was so disorienting, the odd gravity of the empty hole in the earth exerting such a pull toward vertigo and loss of one's hold on reality, that the sight of these men in their customary uniforms was profoundly reassuring. I kept my eyes on them as I advanced.

The police didn't try to stop me; one of the perks of my position is that I seem to belong at the scene of an emergency, even if there's no apparent medical reason for my being there. It didn't occur to me at the time that my presence might have the same kind of grounding effect on others, even police officers, that the presence of police and firemen was having on me. By the time I reached the Fire Chief and his men I had achieved a functional balance between calmness and cold, primal terror. Dan's face as he turned to me showed that he, too, maintained a professional demeanor with great effort. Up close, his eyes were oddly wide and didn't blink as much as they should. He lifted a cigarette to his mouth and his hand shook badly.

"How you doing, Dan?" I said.

Leaving the cigarette between his lips, my old friend used both hands to remove his yellow helmet, and he looked into it for a moment and adjusted something before resettling it on his head. "Oh, same old, same old," he said, looking sick. He turned toward the steps and the enormous hole beyond, took the cigarette from his lips and flicked it through the space where the building's wide front doors used to be.

"You guys help Murray with the crowd," he said to the three men. They nodded and left us, hurrying to find the Police Chief, who I was relieved to hear hadn't vanished with the Town Hall and the Mayor. Then he looked me in the eye and said, "What the hell, Ed? I mean what the hell?"

I shook my head and put a hand on his shoulder.

By dusk on the first day the site was entirely ringed by sawhorses, sandbags, and all the pebbly stone-fronted trash can holders from the business strip on Old Main, and a rotating squad of five patrolmen was assigned to ensure that no one, child or otherwise, got too close. The news people complained about being denied access to a public area, and Police Chief Murray settled that to his own satisfaction, at least, by allowing print photographers to stand, one at a time, on steps and take some pictures of the hole. A very large and impatient-looking officer was assigned to grip each photographer's belt from behind during this process. TV crews from larger towns flew overhead in helicopters.

An Emergency Response Committee was formed early the next morning. Fred Wheeling, President of the Town Council, presided in the absence of Mayor Katherine Dwight. In addition to the Police and Fire Chiefs, the Director of Public Works and the senior Building Inspector were named to the Committee. How I came to be included was never formally explained, though I assumed that Dan Barry was responsible. I had been asleep for only an hour or so when the phone rang at five o'clock and the Council Secretary told me I was expected at a six a.m. meeting in the West End Fire House. I called my office and left a message for Ellie, asking that she cancel just my morning appointments at this point, then quickly showered and dressed.

Fred Wheeling is just the kind of fool you expect a small town politician to be. A mediocrity in every way, he nonetheless considers himself an important and superior man, not suspecting for a moment that the reason he was elected in the first place is that people got so tired of hearing him blather in the grocery store and the barber shop and in the park every election season, ranting about all that was wrong in town and how it should be fixed, that they finally *had* to send him to the Town Hall, where he would surely accomplish nothing and could be at last ignored. He had been Council President for just a year, which meant that his term had one year to run, when Town Hall disappeared and he effectively became Mayor. Yet despite the bizarre and unsettling circumstances that raised him to this position, it was all too plain from the first moments of the first meeting of the Emergency Committee that he would relish his moment. He had already seated himself behind Dan Barry's desk, with the other members of the ERC, Barry among them, relegated to folding metal chairs facing him in a loose semi-circle, when I arrived for the meeting. The room was not intended for so many and was uncomfortably hot, even with the window open. The temperature that day would pass eighty degrees by noon and top out at an unseasonable ninety-one around five p.m. The town map on the Fire Chief's wall was wilting at its corners, and the men assembled drank their coffee very slowly, mostly just resting the foam cups on their legs. I poured myself one from the pot on a file cabinet by the door and sat in the sole remaining empty chair.

"Now that we're all here," Wheeling announced, sitting back and looking at me hard, "let's be sure we know what's what. The Mayor is gone, for whatever reason that may be, and I am in charge. This committee has been formed in response to a crisis, and in a crisis there can be only one leader. As the elected representative of the people of my ward and the President of Town Council by vote of that body, I am the ranking official in this municipality. Anyone who doesn't understand that should decline

right now to serve on the committee and will be replaced." He looked at Dan Barry, he looked at the Director of Public Works, he looked at the Building Inspector. He looked at me. He did not, it occurred to me later, look at Rick Murray, the Chief of Police. Had I noticed it then, would it have been sufficient warning?

The committee's focus initially was to ensure that the crisis site, as Wheeling labeled it, posed no continuing threat to the community and that the investigation could proceed safely and with due rigor. To that end, Mohindar Patel, Director of Public Works, was empowered to enlist police and fire personnel in an examination and assessment of the site, and to request funds for materials that might be found necessary to contain soil erosion and to more "decisively" seal off access to the pit.

Fred Wheeling's vocabulary was a source of pride to him, as potential home buyers who came to him in his capacity as a realtor often learned. I'd been told by patients that they'd had a hard time not laughing when he emphasized the "soundliness" of a builder's construction design, or the "simple inelegance" of an older home. Of course, what Wheeling lacked in linguistic precision he made up for with a misplaced but unshakeable and even aggressive confidence in his verbal acuity. If he said it, it was correct. The logic was iron-clad.

Beware the man who deems his weakness a strength: this is one truth that experience has taught me. Another is, whatever applies to others applies to you. I learned this one a bit late.

With the meeting adjourned, Wheeling was first to leave, followed by Murray and the others. I dropped my empty cup in the trash and stood looking at the Fire Chief, who looked back. "How'd I get into this, Dan?" I asked.

He smiled with half his mouth and shrugged. "Misery loves company," he said.

"I figured. Thanks a lot."

We talked about the search of Mayor Dwight's house, conducted the night before by Rick Murray's police. Barry told me the locals were in charge because there was no evidence of kidnapping, and as yet there'd been no request for state or federal assistance. The federal government was naturally concerned about the sudden and complete disappearance of a municipal building, an event for which there was no precedent, and Barry told me there were a few men in dark suits and sunglasses in town; but as there'd been no apparent loss of life and no hint as yet of involvement by "foreign or domestic agents of disorder," the decision had been made to hang back and allow the officials on site to take the lead. This was in keeping with a policy of empowering state and local officials to maintain order in these unsettled times.

"Katherine's keys were gone, but the car's still in the garage," Barry said. "She always walked to work, though, so that's nothing. Rick figures she went in before anyone else was there, or maybe she went to the office for something late at night. No one knows."

Barry smacked the back of his chair, the one Wheeling had commandeered, and it spun around twice. "It's making me crazy thinking about it," he said. He paused and looked at me, and I saw a very worried and frightened man. He likely saw the same. "Do you think it *could* make me crazy?" he said.

"No more than the rest of us," I assured him. Feeling as I did, though, I wondered if that should be a comfort.

I stopped at Sherman's Diner on my way to the office, knowing I'd have no appointments for a few hours, at least. There were just a few booths full, and the people in them spoke quietly with each other. John Dwight sat in a booth by himself with a cup of coffee and a plate of untouched scrambled eggs and sausage. Walt Sherman saw me looking that way and nodded to tell me I should go over. He'd probably tried talking with John himself and failed.

"Can I join you, John?" I said, standing by the booth. His broad face pale and his blue eyes filmy and reddened, the mayor's husband glanced up for an instant and then back at the nothing he'd been studying in the air. I barely heard him say yes.

Walt brought me a coffee with two creamers and a cinnamon bun. He left for just a moment and returned with a fork and a small orange juice, then left us again.

I poured the creamers into my coffee and stirred it with the fork. I sipped it, set it down. Outside the window, no cars passed on Main Street except for police cruisers. With Main closed, commuters heading for the highway would be clogging the side streets, I thought.

John Dwight was a silver-haired, handsome man in his early fifties. He had retired early from a law firm in the city and had been enjoying a prosperous middle age; Walt swore by his advice in day trading. I saw him in the office once a year for his physical exam and only once had found a problem. It was a high cholesterol count, and when I saw him again the next year, the numbers were good. Now he sat quietly at the diner table, his wide shoulders tensed beneath the green polo shirt he wore. I noticed that the crystal of his wristwatch was broken and the knuckles of both hands were scraped and raw. He sat looking down at his plate as if it had just appeared, a mystery. His fingers lifted the fork once, but he dropped it onto the eggs without even a desultory stab at his breakfast. He turned to the window, though I sensed he wasn't seeing the street or the people walking by outside. When he spoke his voice was low and husky, and he seemed to speak to no one in

particular, or to everyone in general. "Where'd you find her?" he said.

I didn't understand. "What? John, I don't –"

He kept looking at the window. "Where was the body?" he said. His voice was little more than a groan; he sounded like a hanged man might if cut down before asphyxiation. He'd done some hard crying before coming out to the diner. I tried to imagine what he could have been hitting with those abused hands, and decided it was either a cinder block wall in the basement or the external brick of the house.

"No, John," I told him. "Don't think that."

He turned to me sharply and his body seemed to grow denser, heavier. "She's dead," he said, his voice firm and angry. "The damn police were all over the house yesterday. They took our phone bills, her file cabinets, dusted the whole house for fingerprints. The place is a mess. I answered their questions for hours. I don't have any idea what happened to the damn building, Edgar, but the way these cops are acting I know my wife is dead."

He needed a tranquilizer, but I knew better than to offer it outright. "John, consider what we're all dealing with. You're suffering most, because none of us know where Kathy is. But the entire Town Hall has vanished, too. Buildings just don't disappear like that. It's not possible. This thing has no place in a rational universe, it violates the very essence of our reality. No one can say what happened, and the police are as baffled as anyone so they're investigating the only way they know how."

We sat silent. Walt Sherman watched from behind the counter, pretending to tally numbers of some kind on the back of a paper bag. John sipped his coffee and frowned, setting it back down.

"You're exhausted, John," I said.

"You got that right."

"Let me walk you home."

I stood from the booth and waited. He pushed himself up and stood beside me, sighing heavily with the effort.

"I haven't slept," he said. "Do you think you could give me something?"

"Yes, John, absolutely," I said.

I let myself out of the house after he'd gone to bed. He was right, the place was a wreck. Drawers from the china closet in the dining room were out on the table, and candles were on the floor, swept aside without care. The sideboard stood open, the bottles and glasses within all pushed to one end or the other of the upper and lower shelves. At least one glass was broken. In the living room the couch and sofa cushions were disarranged, the curtains from the front bay window on the floor. There was dust from the fingerprinting process on most surfaces, including the television

screen and the mantelpiece. As I left I noticed that the carpet had been pulled up along the walls in the foyer, and the brass trimmed mirror had been taken from the wall with such force that the plaster was badly pitted where the nails had been. What the hell did they think they were doing? My words of reassurance to Kathy Dwight's husband rang less than true now. These men had been on a rampage, nothing less. My pulse throbbed in my ears and I felt lightheaded. I sat on John and Kathy's front porch swing and willed myself to breathe slowly and evenly until I felt all right again. It was clear that I had a need myself. I needed to talk with someone.

I saw my afternoon patients, and when the last had left and Rhonda had gone, too, Ellie came into my office and sat in the chair against the wall across from my desk. She rarely did this, though I hadn't discouraged it. Having her there at that moment was good. I welcomed the company.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" she asked. I knew for sure that I couldn't look all right, not to someone who knew me as Ellie did. Now that Alicia was gone, no one knew me as well.

I said I was feeling less than peppy, or something equally silly. Ellie frowned and said I'd never had the gift of flippancy.

"Fred Wheeling would say 'flippanization,'" I observed.

She asked about the committee meeting, and I gave her the horrid details. "The man's a menace," I concluded.

Ellie nodded. "He scares me," she said. "And he's not the only one."

"They're all scrambling to keep their minds off something they can't handle," I said. "These are not imaginative men, and the enormity of what's happened... they'll be paralyzed if they face it head-on. If it's a question of shoring up the edges of a hole in the dirt, they can handle it. If it's about crowd control and a woman's disappearance, they have no problem. It's what that hole in the dirt *represents* that they can't abide. The impossible has occurred, right here in their town. I heard people in the diner talking about space aliens today, and secret government weapons. Some are looking for someone local to blame. I think that's why the police went berserk in Kathy and John Dwight's house."

"They blame the Mayor?"

"Why not? She's not here, is she? She obviously absconded with the building!"

To my amazement, the next day's paper floated this very idea. And it did so in reporting comments made by none other than Fred Wheeling, now calling himself the town's Acting Mayor.

"Nothing like this has happened before, anywhere," he told the reporter. He noted Kathy Dwight's disappearance on the same night and, because John had told police that he'd last seen her at

around 11PM, added that "Whatever she was doing late at night, alone, it was something she didn't want her husband to know." Speaking from "a secure location near the crisis site," which I'd later learn was a mildewed, little-used banquet room in the old Continental Hotel downtown, "the Acting Mayor concluded, with obvious personal regret, that there are questions about recent events that only Katherine Dwight can answer, if she is ever found."

While not very subtle, the implication was apparently effective. The idea that Kathy Dwight was guilty of *something* took hold quickly, as I discovered in meeting with my patients the day that article appeared, and thereafter. And as the days passed, Fred Wheeling made use of the local media – not just the morning rag but the AM radio station and local access cable TV – to add incrementally (Lord knows how he'd say that) to the innuendo and near slander. Soon, it was all but certain that she'd had some dark motive for removing the Town Hall building in its entirety; eliminating evidence of illicit activities in office, and/or extramarital affairs, was the most widely-held notion. As for how the incredible deed was done, in a single night with no sound made to wake the neighbors and no debris left behind, well, that was indeed a mystery. Too bad Kathy Dwight couldn't be found to explain it for us.

While Wheeling kept the public busy wondering how and why their mayor had perpetrated such a grand theft, the closure of the Town Hall site rapidly became total. Mohindar Patel and his Public Works crews labored hard and long, often through the night, to drive pilings deep into the earth around the hole and then to affix cross beams and aluminum facing to a height of thirteen feet, with the lower sheets of metal buried for half their width in the dirt. I watched for an hour one late afternoon, standing across the street half a block away. Two men in dark suits and sunglasses watched, too, standing near a black SUV parked directly opposite the construction. Mo walked over to them at one point and spoke for a minute, pointing at the new gray wall and then at a partly rolled document he held. When he'd gone back to his crew, one of the men made a call on his cell phone while the other scanned the area with his shaded eyes. When his gaze reached the spot where I stood, I was surprised to feel suddenly out of place, as if I were the stranger and my presence an intrusion. His attention didn't linger, though, and the feeling passed.

The result of Mo Patel's work was a barrier impenetrable to the eye and to anything else short of a rocket launcher, unless you had a blowtorch and a lot of time to use it. The latter, of course, was not likely, given the continued 24-hour presence of Rick Murray's police force.

With predictable redundancy, large yellow posters were glued to the metal wall every six feet, proclaiming RESTRICTED AREA: NO ENTRY WITHOUT OFFICIAL PERMISSION. To the best of my knowledge, no basis for official permission was ever defined.

At a council meeting two weeks after the disappearance of the Mayor and Town Hall, a councilman long known to be Fred Wheeling's lackey proposed that Kathy Dwight's office be officially pronounced vacant, and that Wheeling be named Mayor. Vigorous debate ensued, and the motion was tabled until the next scheduled meeting, two weeks later. The local paper reported no details of the debate, but on the morning after the meeting, a Wednesday, I sat in a booth at Sherman's Diner with Walt, who made a habit of attending council meetings. It was a practice I'd be inclined to class with gawking at car wrecks or reading the memoirs of sex criminals, but Walt was otherwise respectable and approached the whole thing in a spirit of civic responsibility.

"Somebody's got to watch these guys," he'd say.

I've known Walt Sherman for more than forty years, since we'd worked our high school summers together for a local landscaper. Walt was as lean as I was back then, but now he had trouble sliding into one of his own restaurant's booths, his belly pressing the edge of the table. He said he took the blood pressure medicine I made him buy, but the way he ate it didn't much matter. He made the opening move and our perpetual chess competition was on; in the years we've played I may have the edge in wins, but it's close.

There was no one eating in the diner at the time, and Walt had Tina Lombardi behind the counter to handle any business that came in. In the kitchen my nurse's uncle, Bobby Taylor, waited to do some cooking. Nineteen-year-old Tina had no interest in the conversation of two old men. She was playing some kind of game on her cell phone, or sending messages to friends – Walt and I might as well have been on another planet, or lost in whatever limbo had claimed Kathy Dwight.

The question of naming Fred Wheeling Mayor had split the council into two camps, Walt said. "Wheeling's guy says the Mayor's absence is open-ended," he told me, "and she can't fulfill her duties if she's not there. As Council President, Fred should fill the rest of her term."

I opened with my Queen's pawn and Walt brought a knight onto the field. The specific squares involved are beyond me; Walt knows the terminology of the game, but my own handle on the vocabulary has slipped away. Occasionally he gets mad at my lackadaisical commitment to the details, especially when I win.

"Is that in the town charter?" I said.

"It's not clear," he answered. "There's a reading that says okay, and another that says a special election has to be held. The Council President takes the office if the Mayor resigns, dies, or otherwise can't serve, but for how long is the issue."

I mirrored Walt's move with a knight of my own. A couple of Public Works men came into the diner in their hard hats and yellow safety vests, their boots leaving bits of mud on the floor as they sat at the counter. Tina poured coffee, took their orders. "Kathy had what, two years left in her term?" I said.

"Two years plus." Walt slid a Bishop out and turned toward the counter. "Hey Riley, grab a broom before you go and clean my floor, okay?"

Mike Riley turned on his stool, smiling. "You can't afford me," he told Walt. "I'm union."

Walt made a disgusted sound and shook his head. "Tina's twice the worker you are, anyway."

The chess game continued, and it became clear that Walt would win this one. I didn't surrender right away. A stubborn streak is one of my flaws.

"So Wheeling's out to double his time as Mayor," I said. Maybe talking again would distract Walt and he'd make a mistake.

"Right. Check."

Maybe not. I looked at the board a long time. At best, I could last another three moves. I made the first one.

Walt did what I expected. Two moves to go. "Of course, Fred never said a word himself," he told me. "It all came from Brown and Slavitski. So the three of them are on the one side, and the other three want to hold an election."

"And with the Mayor missing, there's no way to break the tie?" One move to go.

"No, and that's why I think there's gonna be fireworks at the next meeting. Check."

I made my last move.

"Checkmate," Walt said, as his rook did the deed.

I sighed and sat back. "I'm slipping," I said.

"Nah," Walt said. "You've never been as good as me."

That night I stood in darkness staring at the wall around the disaster site and at the space in the air above it where a familiar building ought to have been. The policemen there ignored me, after brief nods of recognition when I came walking along Main Street and stopped on the sidewalk. I was not the only one there, aside from them. There was a middle-aged couple I didn't know, an older couple I knew. A few kids I vaguely recognized. I didn't look closely at anyone. None of us spoke.

I don't know how many others came to look at night, or how often, but the police didn't ask us any questions or appear

uncomfortable with our presence. They kept their backs to the fence, mostly, unless they turned to spit tobacco juice on the dirt at its base or to light a cigarette away from the soft wind that blew.

I was surprised to see that the building was, in a vivid way, still there. My mind as I stood looking refused to accept the absence and provided an image in its place, like a photo projected on the screen of the night. The cupolas were there above the third floor, and the building glowed softly yellow where it wasn't striped by the angular black shadows of window sills, thrown roofward by lights pointed up from the lawn. It was a quiet scene, peaceful and calming. I'd seen the Town Hall just this way many times, after hours. It was a bland and homey building, a place where people I knew worked each day at the mostly dull and repetitive business of maintaining life in our small town as we all expected it to be.

Of course there was no lawn, and no lights. No building. And those people I knew had been scattered to any number of makeshift workspaces, the police crowded into the Public Works garage, the various clerks and managers working from homes all over town. Fred Wheeling in his Real Estate office, and in the back room of the Continental.

Chasing the vision of the absent building with deliberate effort, I thought instead about the hole concealed from view behind the tall aluminum barrier. I saw it, as I've said, on the morning it had first appeared. It was a deep, smoothly bordered pit, deep enough to have held the lower reaches of the Town Hall. There was no debris, no broken glass or shattered wall, no wires or cables dangling from the dirt into the abyss, no water pipes jutting into space. It was as if the building had never been there. A perfect removal. An impossible but entirely successful surgery.

The lingering image of the building was analogous to a phantom limb, I reasoned. The organism overall isn't ready to admit that something so substantial, so integral, has been lost. In the conversations I had heard since the event, and indeed in my own conversation, I had noticed that the disappearance of the building was mentioned with much less frequency than that of the Mayor. The reason for this, I felt sure, was scale. The loss of one person was, if troubling and potentially tragic, at least comprehensible. By keeping the public mind focused on Mayor Dwight, Fred Wheeling performed a helpful service despite his self-serving intention. Confronting the loss of the building and the stability and security it inherently represented posed the greater threat to psychological and emotional health. This was a threat I understood personally. I wept where I stood, facing the metal wall and the darkness beyond; my distress went unnoticed by the

policeman who stood on guard at the wall, drumming his fingers on the holster at his hip.



John Dwight was scheduled to see me one day around this time but didn't keep the appointment. I asked Ellie to phone his house and make sure he was all right. He'd agreed to the meeting only after some badgering, one day when I saw him on the street a week or so after I'd given him tranquilizers. His failure to come in didn't surprise me, but I was concerned about him. More than anyone in town, he was likely to have real trouble coping in the aftermath of the events. I'd urged him to see a counselor whose office was near my own, but as far as I knew he hadn't done that.

"Doctor, there's no answer," Ellie told me. I had two more patients to see but Rhonda could manage them, so I walked to John's house.

He didn't answer the bell. The door was unlocked and I let myself in. The mirror in its brass frame was back on the wall in the foyer, and the living room had been straightened up. Drawers from the china closet remained on the dining room table, but the sideboard's doors were closed. In the kitchen, half a sandwich, apparently just Swiss cheese and mustard, sat on a plate beside the sink. A butter knife with a hard brown crust at its tip lay in the sink itself. There was a sour smell, which I discovered was coming from a plastic trash can beside the refrigerator. As I moved to the stairs I called John's name and said who I was, but there was no answer. I walked upstairs with the terrible feeling that I knew what I'd find.

The bedroom door at the end of the hall was open. I called his name again as I approached, without result. As it turned out, I was not prepared for what I found in the room.

The queen-size bed was empty, the top sheet crumpled at its foot and hanging to the floor as if pulled up and flung there. The clock radio on the nightstand was turned away from the bed and a reading lamp lay on the floor, its shade crushed. On the wall by the window between the nightstand and a walk-in closet was a rust-brown smear at eye level; in the closet itself a man's light blue dress shirt was crumpled on the floor, also stained with blood. I could see the print of a hand, the lines made by fingers that had been wiped on the fabric.

I looked on the floor on the far side of the bed, and under the bed as well. I left the bedroom and checked the bathroom, where I found nothing out of order, no signs of a struggle and no additional blood. The hand towel hanging on a ring beside the sink was clean. Looking closely at the carpet in the hall, I found several stains and

a trail left by something heavy dragging the nap back against itself. The trail ran from the bedroom door to the top of the stairs. Returning to the bedroom, I confirmed that the light blanket I'd seen on the bed the night I brought John home from Sherman's Diner was missing.

I called the police from the phone in the kitchen. Two minutes later, the interior of the house spinning in colored lights that flashed through the windows from the street and driveway outside, I spoke with Rick Murray in the Dwights' living room as uniformed officers bustled around us and swarmed upstairs, shouting at each other and into their handheld radios.

The Police Chief listened to my account of the day, from John's missing an appointment to my coming in to find evidence that he'd been attacked. He said little until I'd finished, asking only that I repeat the time of the scheduled appointment and when I'd arrived at the house.

"The blood on the wall was dry, and the shirt, too," I said. "It didn't happen today. The shirt certainly wouldn't be so dry, looking at how much blood was on it."

The Chief chewed his lower lip and appeared to consider my analysis. Waiting for him to speak, I noticed that he'd kept just a bit more distance between us than you'd expect, the whole time I was talking. And for the first time I realized that he had always done this. At accident scenes, and in homes where there'd been a fatal heart attack or stroke, he would stop his approach a full stride before most people would stop, and when he reached out with a clipboard to have me sign as Physician on Site his arm would be fully extended. He did this with others, as well. But not with everyone. Not with children, for example. The reason came to me in the same instant that I recognized his habit: the Chief is not a short man, standing around average height, but I'm taller by two or three inches. Despite his obvious physical fitness, or because of it – a former Marine, he exhausts much younger policemen with his workout regimen in the high school weight room, and he favors short sleeve uniform shirts except in the coldest parts of winter, clearly flaunting his tremendous biceps – he is not comfortable looking up to meet my eyes.

"Write a report and we'll let the state lab evaluate your conclusions," he said. "I'll have someone pick it up at your office tomorrow."

He looked at me unblinking until I realized that I'd been dismissed.

"I'll do that," I said, and left the house.

At a Friday afternoon meeting of the Emergency Response Committee in the back room of the Continental, Mo Patel reported that Public Works had completed its assessment of the crisis site

and that erosion was not a threat. The site, he told Fred Wheeling, could be used for a new Town Hall if the funding could be obtained from the state and county.

"When did we discuss rebuilding on the site?" Dan Barry said. "Or did that come up in Council?"

Wheeling fixed him with a cold stare. "The rebuild is a matter for the Mayor, Planning and Public Works," he declared, pointing briefly at Patel and Bill Fallon of the Planning Department. "We need a Town Hall. There's no reason to discuss it."

I sipped my coffee and set the cup on the bare metal table before me. "It's part of the response to the emergency, isn't it, Fred? That's what this committee is for, to discuss and formulate the town's response –"

Wheeling glanced at Rick Murray, then locked me in the look he'd given Barry. His head tilted to one side and he pursed his lips a moment before speaking. "Doctor Miller, I'm personally wondering just why you're even in this room," he said. I was startled by his bluntness and felt my face flush with anger. "We have no medical issues to consider, and what you can offer is essentially nothing."

"Jesus, Fred!" Dan Barry erupted, standing from his seat beside me. "Ed Miller knows this town as well as anybody and you can be damn sure that people have been made sick by what's happened. I haven't slept right in weeks, and we've had what, Ed, three heart attacks and an attempted suicide?"

I nodded, my throat too tight to force words through. I'd been seeing a lot of people who complained of sleepless nights, nervousness, mood swings, symptoms I'd suffered myself. There had in fact been four heart attacks and a stroke in recent weeks, much more activity than is usual for our town. And the attempted suicide was Donna Lombardi, the missing Mayor's secretary and mother of Tina, Walt Sherman's counter girl. It was Tina who had found her just two days before this committee meeting, unconscious in the garage of their home with the car running.

"So the doctor should be dealing with those things," Wheeling said to Barry. Then he shifted his glare to me. "And let's not assume that every germ and bad mood in town comes out of the hole on Main Street."

"Ed stays on the committee," Dan insisted. "You approved it. You all did."

Wheeling ignored him and looked at me. "What do you say, Doctor? Don't you think you can better serve this town back at your own office?"

It wasn't clear to me just how I'd become the focus of Wheeling's hostility, or even if I had, really. It could be that the man is just hostile by nature. But at my age I'm not about to

shiver and run from the stare of a bullying small town real estate agent.

"What I think, Fred, is that you need to be watched," I told him, putting as much chill on my words as possible. "You're trying to grab the rest of Mayor Dwight's term in office, and now you want to bulldoze this committee into playing rubber stamp for you. I think I'm up to being of service in more than one way, and one of those is right here. Paying attention."

The room was silent. Patel and Fallon looked uncomfortable. Beside me, I could sense Dan Barry's tension. Wheeling stared at me with unsettling anger.

Rick Murray, seated beside him, chewed his lower lip.

Dan and I weren't alone in trying to slow Fred Wheeling's takeover of local government. At the council meeting the next week, three members persisted in refusing to approve Wheeling's assumption of Kathy Dwight's term. Walt Sherman told me that Wheeling had kept silent for all but the last minutes of the meeting, when he lashed into Pete Chase in particular. Ellie's husband was into his second term on the council, and he was the most vocal of those who felt a special election was required by the town charter.

"Stop playing games!" Wheeling shouted at him, in Walt's account. "We're in a goddamn crisis, and the town needs stable leadership. If you want to be Mayor, fine, run in the next election. But don't try to pervert the system for your own ends with this 'special election' crap. The three of you make me sick. Have you no sense of responsibility to the people who elected you?"

The local paper corroborated Walt's version of events, with the signal difference that in its rendition Fred Wheeling was a true blue champion of Democracy, fighting back an attempted coup d'état. Ellie was quiet that day in the office and left for home immediately after the last patient had left.

Another thing Walt told me about the council meeting didn't make the paper's account. He had stood himself, as residents in attendance were permitted to do, and weighed in on the questions of the day.

"It's the first time," he said, shaking his head at his own audacity. "I've been going to those meetings for years and years, but this time I had to tell Fred Wheeling to his face what I think of him. That son of a bitch is a would-be Mussolini, and I said his bullshit would be funny if it wasn't for the fact that Katherine Dwight is still missing and we've got a great big hole downtown that scares the hell out of everybody. What happened to Town Hall, Fred? I asked him. How does a town lose a thing like that? Why is it always some loudmouth who's never done anything for anybody

that thinks he knows better than everybody else what people need done?"

There in his diner Walt did another thing he'd never done before. He laid down his King in the middle of a game and forfeited to me. "I got a little out of control," he confessed. His voice shook and he wiped his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I could have been more on track, should have shut up before I did. But damn it, Doc, people are scared. You know I've seen them, women and men both, sit at my tables and cry? And here's this asshole making it all about *him*."

A few days later, we had back-to-back cancellations and Ellie asked if she could talk to me about something. We sat in my office; I could see that she was upset and brought her chair to the side of the desk. I moved the box of tissues on the desk nearer to her but she waved it away.

"It's about John Dwight," she began. "Pete's heard something. He got a letter at the garage."

She stopped and pressed her lips together. Her eyes filled but she didn't wipe them, didn't reach for a tissue. Her hands were folded on her lap.

"The letter says it happened at three in the morning, the day before you went to the Dwights'. John was taken from the house by two policemen. They put him in the back seat of a car and he was driven away. It wasn't a police car. Then the police got into their own car and left."

Ellie watched my face for a reaction. I don't know that there was one; I felt frozen in place, truly very cold. The knowledge put us all in danger, that was clear.

We agreed to tell no one else of the letter unless she and Pete and I all agreed to do so. I accepted her invitation to dinner that night.

There was no dinner. Ellie apologized, saying that she just couldn't get her thoughts together long enough to cook. Pete called for some Chinese food instead. We didn't eat much. The children were spending the night at the home of a friend.

"You see the implications," Pete said to me. We sat at their dining room table, glasses of wine untouched. The food had yet to arrive.

"There are many implications," I replied. Pete and Ellie were holding hands, looking at me intently. They had been very frightened and I saw that turning to me gave them comfort. It was flattering, but could I justify their trust?

As calmly as I could, I identified the various possibilities that occurred to me.

"It could be that the motive was robbery," I said. "Searching the house after Katherine disappeared, a couple of the cops saw

something valuable. They couldn't take it then so they came back later, one driving an unmarked car. Since John was at home they had to get him out of the way."

"So that would mean just two or three cops in on it," Ellie said.

"Right. Any idea who sent the letter, by the way?"

Pete shook his head. "It wasn't mailed," he said. "It was dropped in the slot on the garage door, I found it in the morning when I opened the shop."

He left the table, went into the kitchen. As he came back and dropped the letter on the table, the door bell chimed. We all stiffened for a moment.

"The food," Pete said, and laughed at himself. Ellie and I relaxed, too.

While Pete paid the delivery driver, Ellie and I looked at the letter. Pete's name was typed on the front of the envelope. The letter itself was typed, too, and single-spaced. It read:

Councilman:

In the paper I see you respect the law. You should know at 3am last Wed. I saw two town cops put John Dwight in a car in his driveway. They carried him in a blanket. He was not dead because I heard him say something and they told him to shut up. The car was not a cop car. After it left they left too.

In an odd way the letter gave me hope. Someone wanted to help John Dwight, or to see that his killers, if he was now dead, were exposed and punished. And whoever this person was, he or she saw something in Pete Chase, not the garage man but the elected official, that made him seem worthy of trust.

As Pete placed a brown grocery bag on the table, Ellie got up to get plates and silverware. I put the letter back in its envelope and handed it to Pete.

We ate and drank some of the wine and talked more about the letter. Another possibility, I said, was that John had had a breakdown of some sort and hurt himself; the person who drove him away might have been a friend, taking him quietly for treatment to avoid the press. It was ridiculous and I held up my hands in surrender as Ellie gave me a "You know better" look.

"No sense dancing around this," Pete said from the other side of the table. "The police attacked and abducted the man."

"If the letter's true," Ellie cautioned.

Pete nodded. "Yeah, but why write it if it's *not* true?"

"You believe everything you read?" Ellie said. I felt for a moment as if I were not present at the table, but watching them

through glass on some other night as they bantered and teased each other over dinner. The tone was not what it ought to be, though. There was no fun in this; the context was too dark and unsettling. And I was there, and there for a reason.

"I think it's the truth," I said. They looked at me. The certainty in my voice was what they wanted. They needed me to know what was what and what to do.

"Why?" Ellie asked. "What makes you think so?"

It was a dangerous moment. I didn't want to overreach, but ever since Ellie had told me about the letter I had been aware of a feeling that had been with me for some time, but which I hadn't allowed myself to acknowledge. It grew stronger when I'd spoken with Rick Murray in John Dwight's living room, and stronger still when Fred Wheeling challenged my presence on the emergency committee. Wheeling's attitude then was the same as the Chief's: I wasn't supposed to be where I was.

"There's some kind of plan," I said, hoping that what I was about to say would sound less paranoid than seemed likely. "I don't know what it is, exactly, or who's involved, but it seems to me that some people have been getting in the way and maybe John was one of them."

Ellie and Pete were sitting forward with their arms on the table, waiting for me to say more.

"I took John home one night," I told them. "I met him in town, it was the night after the police had gone through his house. He hadn't slept. He was worried about Kathy, of course. And he was angry, really angry about the way his home had been treated during the search. On the way to the house, he was saying he wouldn't stand for it, he was going to write to the state Attorney General, contact the media outside of town."

"Did he do any of that?" Pete asked.

"I don't know."

"Even if he did, why would that get him killed?" Ellie said. "Or beaten and taken away. His house was roughed up, he wasn't. There'd be no big punishment of the police for that."

"But he was complicating the plan," I said. "Fred Wheeling wants the rest of Kathy Dwight's term as Mayor. And I think there's more beyond that. I don't know what, but he's got Rick Murray with him and they don't want anyone making noise or getting in their way. Pete found that out in Council, and we saw how the local paper's going to play this. I got my own taste of it from Murray when I reported John missing, and then from Fred in a committee meeting."

I told them about both events, and about Dan Barry standing with me in the meeting.

"I've always liked Dan," Pete said. We sat for a time picking at our food. The wine was gone and Pete brought another bottle.

"Do you have a solid three in opposition to Wheeling on Council?" I asked Pete.

"Oh yeah," he said, nodding emphatically. "Nick Das tells me there's no question the charter calls for a special election. And Helen Connelly's voted against everything Fred's ever proposed, as far as I know."

"Slavitski and Brown are a different story," Ellie said.

Pete drank half a glass of the new wine. "Don't get me started on those morons," he said.

I suggested that Nick Das might take the charter question to court.

"We've discussed it," Pete said. His voice and eyes were showing the effects of the wine he'd drunk, and I was feeling mine, too. We'd have to call it a night soon.

Ellie began clearing the table, taking our plates back to the kitchen. I stood to help, and Pete said, "Sit down, Ed, have another."

I sat, but poured myself just half a glass.

"Ellie's pregnant," Pete said quietly, while his wife was in the kitchen.

The news was a shock. First, I knew that if Ellie had wanted me to know, she'd have told me herself, which made Pete's telling me a violation of her confidence in him. And then there was the blow to my own professional pride; I hadn't noticed any sign of pregnancy, and why *hadn't* Ellie come to me? I was her doctor. Beyond that, her withholding the news hurt me personally. We were friends, almost family.

Before I could respond, Ellie came back into the room. She looked at the level of wine in the bottle, then at Pete. She saw that I had half a glass. For the first time, I realized that the wine in Ellie's glass was still red; the second bottle we'd been emptying was a white zinfandel. Had she ever finished the first glass she'd poured?

She saw me looking. She took her glass from the table, along with the bottle, and returned to the kitchen.

I carried an umbrella as I made my way home from the Chase's that night but kept it closed and walked hatless in the light rain, liking the cool wetness on my face. I don't drive much in town, using the car mainly for trips to County Hospital or on some rare errand to another, more distant locale. This night the walk seemed especially wise, as the wine was fogging my thoughts and I wanted them clear. There were no other pedestrians, unless you count a cat or two. Once, walking along one of the residential streets on which my patients slept or made love or watched late night

television, I saw a patrol car gliding by up ahead, its north-south route bisecting my east-west amble. I missed a step and stumbled on a rise in the pavement. The car went on. I hadn't been seen.

Why didn't the Police Department lose anyone when the Town Hall vanished? I suddenly wondered. They were based there. Surely there had been a dispatcher on duty, at least. I stood a moment on the sidewalk and thought it through. I knew the women who served as night dispatchers. They'd both been in the office quite recently. How could that be?

I walked on. It was a question for daylight and sobriety.

I woke to a late June morning, bright and hot. By noon the sun would be high and white in the cloudless sky; temperatures for the last several days had been above ninety degrees. The night would bring what seemed sure to be a tense and inconclusive meeting of the Town Council, with no sign from any member of the body that his or her position on the matter of a special election had changed. Public interest in the meeting was intense; the paper had been urging residents to attend and support their Mayor's effort to ensure security and stability for the next two years, at least. Pete Chase and his council allies could be in for a hard time: the meeting was to be held at the high school auditorium to accommodate the expected crowd.

Walt Sherman called from the diner before I left for the office. "Be here at six and we'll go together," he said. I told him I'd be there.

Ellie had called in sick, leaving a message on the machine, but I went ahead with the day's appointments and hoped that Rhonda's record-keeping would give her what she needed for billing and such. It was a light day, as it turned out. A number of no-shows and two cancellations.

"Not much traffic here, either," Walt said as we left the diner at five after six. "I guess when it's this hot people stay at work or go to a bar for lunch, right?" Tina Lombardi sat near the cash register, typing on her phone. Her mother was home from the hospital now, but I wasn't treating her; there was a visiting nurse at the house during the day and Walt had told me she was seeing a psychiatrist for depression.

The high school parking lot was nearly full. Walt parked his Buick as close as he could get and we walked with a good number of other people to the school's main entrance, where the doors had been propped open. Inside, the lobby was loud and hot, with hundreds of people talking and waiting for a chance to get into the auditorium and find a seat. Most of the crowd was adult, but I saw some young people I knew were students at the school. With the heat we'd been suffering, the almost universal outfit of choice was short sleeves and shorts. The air smelled of sweat and the

building's air conditioning didn't have a chance. Not until the doors were closed, at least.

Ellie had saved us seats seven or eight rows from the stage, on which six chairs were lined up behind two long tables. As we sat I noticed that there was a microphone on an adjustable stand in the aisle between the front rows of each seating section. These were for public comment, I assumed. Walt confirmed it.

"People got the right," he said. "But if I try to get up and talk again, Doc, promise you'll knock me flat on my ass."

I turned to look back at the crowd, and it was impressive. I didn't know the capacity of the auditorium, but it was virtually full with fifteen minutes left before the meeting would begin. The students I'd seen earlier had chosen not to sit. They stood against the rear wall, a dozen or so laughing and shouting at each other. This was an unusual event for them, a non-school event in their school. I doubted many would stay once the meeting began and the novelty of the scene gave way to the dull adult business of governance.

Pete Chase came by to hug Ellie and thank us for coming. As he left and walked toward the stairs at the side of the stage someone said something to him from an aisle seat and he glanced back, looking annoyed.

The council members seated themselves as expected, with Pete, Nick Das and Helen Connelly behind one of the tables and Fred Wheeling's bloc behind the other. The heavy main curtain, purchased a few years before with money raised by a graduating class via car wash, yard sale, candy peddling and relentless dunning of local businesses and professionals – I'd given, ultimately, more than a hundred dollars – was closed a few yards behind the council. Wheeling arrived on stage last, stepping into the light from stage right to an eruption of general applause that took Ellie, Walt and I by surprise. From the back of the room came a cacophony of metallic shrieking. I turned with many others and could see the high school students, all or most of them boys, blowing into whistles that hung on lanyards around their necks. They must have had them inside their shirts, identical blue t-shirts with lettering on them I couldn't read from so far away. Had they been wearing those earlier?

As Council President, Wheeling called the meeting to order. The Town Clerk, Mary Stone, sat at a flip-top school desk behind and to the right of the council tables, a laptop computer open before her. Among the duties of her office was to act as council secretary, taking notes and preparing the minutes of each meeting.

The council members had not dressed as casually as their audience. Pete Chase wore a button-down light green shirt and necktie with khaki pants; Nick Das, beside him, looked the

prosperous attorney he was in a summer weight, pale blue suit. Helen Connelly had tied her usually wild gray hair behind her neck and wore a butterfly sun dress patterned with hand-sized ladybugs. Behind the table at stage right, Andy Slavitski had the sleeves of a denim shirt folded back halfway up his thick forearms, and wore khakis like Pete's. Bob Brown's white oxford strained around his enormous middle. Beneath the table, his legs in dark slacks were splayed to support the weight. Between Slavitski and Brown sat Fred Wheeling, all business in a dark blue suit and tie, his thick glossy hair freshly cut and combed back. He wore a big gold ring on his left hand, gleaming in the auditorium lights.

But he didn't sit for long. Having called the meeting to order and having introduced each of the council members to the crowd, calling for quiet when hissing and whistles greeted three of the names but allowing the applause for two others, and waving down with a smile the loud cheers for his own, Wheeling rose from his seat and walked around the table, stopping at center stage with the rest of the council behind him to address the audience. A photographer from the local paper crouched before the stage, snapping away.

"Friends and neighbors," Wheeling began, and it was instantly apparent that he was wearing a wireless microphone, his voice issuing from speakers mounted near the ceiling in the front corners of the room. "There is no question that the central concern of tonight's meeting of your Town Council is an important one. At stake is the direction your town will take as it charts a path to the future following a terrible, terrible day. We have all suffered a calamitizing double loss. We may never know what happened to our beloved Town Hall building, a fixture of our lives for *all* our lives. And questions remain about the disappearance of the former Mayor, Katherine Dwight..."

At this, several whistles shrilled from the back of the room and some in the crowd hissed. Wheeling frowned his disapproval. "None of that," he said, shaking his head sadly. "Let's reserve judgment until the facts are in."

I looked at Ellie, and then at Pete onstage. Their faces wore similar expressions, concerned, maybe confused, but... rapt. No one expected such a bold star turn from Wheeling. His style in previous council meetings, except when he lost his temper, had been to hang fire and let others state his case for him. On this night, however, it was clear he would no longer play at subtlety. This was the full court press for public support. And he was doing it well.

"But the question we must ask is *not* 'What happened?'" Wheeling continued. "We have a *fine* police force and some exceptional minds at work on that."

He paused for the applause he wanted the police force to have, and got it.

Where was Rick Murray? I wondered. I hadn't seen him, and there'd been just a pair of policemen outside directing parking lot traffic when Walt and I arrived.

"The question, friends, is 'What next?' How do we best protect our families and secure our safety in a world where buildings and people vanish forever without a trace, in the dark of one awful night? Do we bind together in trust and solidarity? Or do we fragmentate and say, everyone for himself -- *and I'm sure gonna get mine!*" He glanced quickly, almost imperceptibly, over his right shoulder toward Pete's table.

The crowd booed and hollered, whistles screaming now from all directions. I saw a cluster of blue t-shirts off to the left, another to the right. Wheeling paced the front of the stage. Behind their table, Pete, Nick and Helen looked stunned. Brown and Slavitski clapped along with the audience. I looked at Walt and found he was looking at me, amazed. Ellie sagged in her seat, her face drained of color. I put a hand on her knee and squeezed. She looked at me and wiped her eyes. "I'm okay," she said. I could barely hear her in the clamor.

"We're going to vote tonight on whether or not we need a special election!" Wheeling boomed.

The crowd screamed as if stabbed. "No! No!" dozens of voices shouted, directly behind us, in front of us, all around. I began to be afraid. Pete looked nervously from side to side, then peered ahead into the lights, squinting to find Ellie's face for support.

"I tell you what!" Wheeling answered the uproar. He held out his arms toward the crowd, then jabbed his thumbs back toward his chest. "I WANT that election! Let's give it to 'em! Let's vote right now!"

Pete and Nick Das stared at each other, their eyes wide. Helen Connelly sat back in her chair, gaping at the broad back of Fred Wheeling at the edge of the stage. Ellie, beside me, was shouting something I couldn't hear without leaning close.

"Point of Order! Point of Order!" she cried, her face milk white, tears standing in her eyes.

Walt gripped my arm and spoke into my ear. "Let's get Ellie out of here right now," he said.

Ellie was confused, but allowed me to guide her out of the auditorium. As we moved up the aisle toward the door, a blue-shirted student blowing short, sharp blasts on his whistle rushed by toward the stage and collided with her, knocking her to the floor. Walt and I helped her up; the boy who'd hit her didn't look back.

Standing in groups near the front doors of the school, a dozen or more police officers stared at us as we left the building. None

came forward to ask what was wrong, despite the fact that two old men were obviously helping a distraught young woman from the scene of some at least minor trauma. Stopping a moment to catch our breaths, we felt the weight of the thick evening air and began to sweat heavily in the summer heat. Behind us, the shouting and whistling continued in the auditorium. It seemed distant now that we were out of the room, muted. But it went on.

Ellie's car was nearer the building than Walt's, so we took her there. Walt got her to sit and I crouched down to speak with her.

"Ellie, are you hurt? Did you hurt anything when you fell?"

She shook her head slowly, as if dazed. "I'm okay."

I didn't like her tone or the way her gaze didn't seem to reach my face. "Stay with her and hold her hands," I said to Walt. "Talk to her. I'm going to get Pete."

The police watched me re-enter the school. I felt their eyes on my back as I waded again into the bedlam of whistles and shouts.

Ranged before the stage now were the boys with whistles. They stood shoulder to shoulder facing the room, blowing their whistles hard. I recognized them now, most of them. They looked almost like a family, members of the same thick-armed, broad-chested brood, smug looks on their wide, none-too-bright faces. Andy Slavitski's kids were there, twin linemen like their once Varsity Captain dad. The sons of some of Rick Murray's crew. Others who I didn't know, but they all fit the mold. Fifteen of them I counted, their faces red, eyes narrowed, muscles and tendons bulging on their necks, and across every blue-shirted chest the same words in white block letters: WE ARE THE FUTURE. Above them on stage, Fred Wheeling stood beaming in the lights.

Everyone in the room appeared to be standing. Arms were raised high, hands clapping. I saw people laughing and cheering, urging the whistle squad on. As I reached the front of the auditorium I saw that Rick Murray was present, after all. He stood in the wings off to the right side of the stage, arms crossed, face expressionless. The seats behind Wheeling where Pete, Nick and Helen had been sitting were empty.

I walked down a short, dark hallway beside the stage and through a door that stood open on my right. Three people stood together in the area back of the closed main curtain. Nick Das stopped talking as I suddenly appeared.

"Pete, Ellie needs you," I said, nodding hello to Helen and Nick. "She's outside in the car, pretty shaken up."

Pete glanced at Nick and Helen. "I -" he began.

"Just go," Helen Connelly said. "We'll handle this, one way or another."

Nick Das looked at me, then at Pete. If I was pressed to name the most intelligent man in town, it would be Nick. He was not only

educated and well read, but a shrewd assessor of people and their moods. I've been told that in court he would adapt his approach and his arguments to the temper of the moment, to things he saw in the posture and the eyes of judge and jury.

"We may end up in tar and feathers," he said now with an odd half smile. "But there won't be any kind of vote, Pete. Go."

Back in the dark hallway Pete turned to leave through the auditorium. I stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "This way," I said. I led him to a door that opened in back of the school and we walked around the outside of the auditorium to the parking lot. Ellie and Walt were where I'd left them. A tall young policeman stood near the car, too. I recognized him. He'd held the belt of the news photographers who took pictures of the Town Hall crater on the day all this had started. Well over six feet in height and built like a stevedore, he wore the short sleeved uniform routinely, as did his Chief, and there was a tattoo on his muscled left forearm of two snakes twined around a sword. On his belt were a gleaming nightstick and a can of pepper spray, along with the holster containing his sidearm. The gold pin on his shirt bore the name "Hall." His mouth curled into a smirk and his eyebrows lifted in amusement as he saw Pete approaching.

"Leaving early?" he said. He stretched out his right arm, leaned against the car. Pete knelt by Ellie and embraced her. They spoke quietly, her tone worried and his reassuring.

"Councilman," the young cop said. "Your wife is pretty upset. I'd be glad to drive her home, so you can get back inside and vote."

Pete stood and faced him. "You get the fuck away from me," he said, and the policeman stood away from the car. He stood calmly with his feet planted at shoulder width, one palm raised toward Pete and the other hand casually at his side, near the nightstick.

"No trouble, Councilman," he said, his eyes shining and his voice relaxed. He focused his attention entirely on Pete Chase, forgetting Walt and I were there. Pete was not much older than himself and in good shape, a working man fired with anger and adrenaline. There was nothing that a sixty year old doctor or an overweight diner man could do to cause him a moment's concern. Despite the situation, or maybe because of it, Hall smiled.

Pete glared at him. Ellie reached out and rested her fingertips on the back of her husband's hand. "Pete," she said, softly.

"I think it's best if the Councilman takes his wife home," I said, stepping forward. Hall's eyes did not leave Pete for an instant. "There won't be a vote tonight, anyway."

Ellie succeeded in pulling Pete back to her side and the big cop turned his eyes to me. "You want to bet on that, Doc?" he said.

Ellie got out of the car and moved around to the passenger side. I nodded at Pete to get in the car and closed the door as he reluctantly sat behind the wheel.

"I'll come by to see Ellie," I told him. "Walt, drive me over?"

"Yeah. Sure," Walt said. He was looking past me toward the building. I turned and saw that half a dozen policemen had moved from the front of the high school to the edge of the parking lot and were standing there, facing our way. The rest had stayed where they were but were looking toward us, as well. From the auditorium, I noticed, came the rumble of a single voice speaking. The whistles and shouting had quieted.

I knew whose voice it had to be.

When Pete and Ellie had left, Walt and I walked to his car, watched by Hall and a few others. Most of the police returned to their positions near the school building, but Hall lingered until we turned out of the lot and onto Thurstin Street, headed into town.

"Turn north on Main and go in behind the school off Avelard," I told Walt.

He shot me a look but then shrugged his round shoulders. "Okay," he said.

We heard it all from backstage, behind the curtain. Fred Wheeling told the crowd that every citizen had a right and a duty to protect his home and community, and that we had all been living "in la-la land" before Katherine Dwight and our Town Hall disappeared, believing that "all the bad stuff on the TV news happened someplace else, never here in *our* town."

"But order can't be maintained in a country of the blind!" he went on. "Somebody has to have his eyes open, somebody has to see the danger is real! The agents of disorder do not limit themselves to attacks on other shores. The agents of disorder are not congregating only in places where people eat strange, disgusting food, and wear weird outfits, and pray to strange, unnatural gods."

Walt Sherman looked at me and tossed his hands in the air. "An evangelist now!"

Wheeling strode the stage, his voice amplified through the speakers but audible to us from his own lips through the curtain, too, moving from one end of his pulpit to the other, back and forth. The calamity should wake us up to how vulnerable we are, he said. Now is not the time to depend on "red tape and rule books written for a different game."

"This is the time to say, We Will Stand. We will not fall apart, we'll fall in line, together. We're strong together, we're weak apart. We Will Stand with our friends and neighbors. We won't waste precious time whining and debating! Say it together, loud and strong, We Will Stand!"

The predictable chanting ensued, so loud it registered on the skin. The floor shook as the crowd stamped its feet in time with the words. The whistles of Wheeling's blue-shirted youth group joined in, three shrieking syllables added again and again to the din.

Finally, eventually, it became less intense. I assume that Wheeling himself waved the crowd to a gradual quiet. "Thank you," he said. "We're in this together, thank you."

There was almost total quiet then. Someone must have come on stage – was it Hall? The Chief? – to speak with Wheeling, because the next thing he said, in a tone of disbelief, was, "Friends and neighbors, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for us all, because I have just been told that one of our Special Electionistas" – he paused here for a chorus of boos from the crowd – "one of my fellow council members has left us before we can vote."

More booing and catcalls. I wanted to reach out and pluck Nick and Helen from their seats, to spare them this.

"But hell, what do we need *him* for?" Wheeling said, and the crowd whooped and applauded.

For the first time, I heard Nick Das's voice. "The full Council must be present!" he shouted, but the response from the crowd obliterated his next words.

After that, Wheeling apparently returned to his chair. In dry, dispassionate tones, he called for a vote on Councilman Chase's proposal for a Special Election to determine the town's next Mayor.

"Mr. Slavitski?"

"Aye."

Mr. Brown?

"Aye."

"Mrs. Connelly?"

Silence.

"Mr. Das?"

"Mr. President, this vote cannot proceed," Nick began. The audience roared.

When the noise ebbed, Wheeling spoke again.

"Mr. Das, will you vote aye or nay?"

"I will not." Whistling, boos.

"The Council President votes in favor. With three in favor, two abstentions and one member not present, the ayes have a majority."

Cheers answered this, and Wheeling continued. "Each member of Council will now name the council member he or she believes would best lead our town for the next three years. The citizens here assembled shall approve one of the top two vote-getters by acclamation."

"Point of Order, Mr. President!" Nick Das protested. Whistles and shouts answered his voice, but he persisted. The noise abated

and he went on. "There is no allowance for such an election anywhere in the town charter, and its result would be completely illegitimate. Council should vote on a Special Election as defined by charter, and the vote requires the presence of all members."

As Wheeling waited for the renewed clamor to subside, a deep and hopeless chill spread throughout my body. The emotions I'd been feeling for weeks coalesced into a single, slow-moving substance that seemed to fill my bones with ice and freeze every muscle from my feet to the nape of my neck. There behind the curtain, unable to see the hundreds of faces staring and hissing at the stage, I felt unmoored, estranged from reality, lost and foreign in my own town. I wondered, if I peer out through that curtain, will I truly see people I know? Can these be the people I have lived among so long, the families I've guided through illness and injury, the women and men I have delivered into the world, cared for, and felt I understood? Was I, finally, precisely the blind man Fred Wheeling had mentioned in his exhortation of this unthinking, completely malleable mass?

Walt Sherman held me as I lay on the floor. His wide, round face was ghost-pale, his eyes wide and frightened. "We're gonna vote anyway," Fred Wheeling said beyond the curtain.



It was embarrassing to have Ellie taking care of me, when I'd intended to go and see to her. But there she was beside the bed, wiping my face with a damp cloth and checking the thermometer she'd placed beneath my tongue. Pete Chase and Walt stood by the door, watching.

"That's a neat trick, shocking me out of a nervous breakdown by collapsing yourself," Ellie said.

"You need to rest," I told her.

"Forget it, Doc," Pete said. "I tried."

Walt had helped me from the school to his car out back after my faint, then driven me home and put me to bed. I remembered little of it, but he filled me in later. He called Pete to let him know what happened, and Ellie had gotten the facts from her husband because he'd taken the call on their bedside phone and she, lying there to rest her own frayed nerves, could see on his face that something was wrong.

"No fever," Ellie said.

I tried to smile. "Thank you," I said.

She looked down at me and pressed a hand to her mouth. The skin beside her eyes wrinkled. "Don't be sick," she said, and her eyes just then changed from near panic to focused, controlled. "It's not allowed."

"Not me," I assured her. Here, at least, was one person I hadn't misjudged.

Dan Barry came by the next day to make sure I was all right. It was a Wednesday, so there were no appointments at the office, and on Ellie's orders I was to spend the entire day at home, doing nothing strenuous. I sat with the Fire Chief in my living room. He'd brought a convenience store coffee with him, I had a cup of green tea.

"I stopped by the diner and Walt was talking with Nick Das," Barry said. "I don't think I ever saw Nick at the diner before, it was odd. You don't think of those guys, Mo Patel or Das and them, hanging out for a coffee and eggs, or at least I don't. Walt was saying you were okay, resting at home, and I thought wow, I missed something. He told me you passed out at the meeting last night. It was something, I hear. Fred's mayor now for three years, not just Kathy Dwight's two."

"It isn't legal," I said. "Nick knows the charter cold, and Fred's way out of line. This will end up in court, and you know who to put your money on when that happens." I felt oddly confident, almost buoyant. Something had happened to me during the night; my mood and attitude were on the rise, out of the abyss. I knew Ellie had much to do with it, and just hearing the names of people I could still trust, from another good man I knew, was helping move my recovery along. I'd do as Ellie said and stay home a day, and then I'd be ready to take on a town full of Fred Wheelings.

"I hope so," Barry said. "Committee meeting Friday, by the way. If you can't make it, I'll let you know what goes on."

I drank some tea and waved the idea away with my free hand. "I'll be there, Dan."

Barry nodded, and looked down at his coffee cup. He sighed. "You know I don't want to tell you this right now," he said, not looking up. "But Donna Lombardi died this morning. They flew her up to County in a helicopter, but it was too late."

Donna Lombardi. Slightly high blood pressure, allergic to cats and ragweed pollen. Widowed by cancer when her daughter Tina was nine or ten, Secretary in the mayor's office for the last fifteen years. Always kept her appointments, and made sure that Tina's immunizations and check-ups were taken care of on schedule. I wished I'd gone by the house to see her since she'd been home from County. I knew she had a nurse coming in, though, and with all that was going on these days...

But this was just rationalizing. I should have seen her, there was no excuse. She'd been my patient a long time. "Suicide?" I asked.

"Yeah," the Fire Chief said. "This time she took pills *and* ran the car in the garage. Tina was out late, found her around four a.m."

When Barry had left I sat in the kitchen a while with another cup of tea. The living room is for guests; I do my solitary time in the kitchen.

Alicia used to have herb pots hanging from hooks all over this room. It smelled like a garden then: parsley, thyme, nasturtiums, basil, tarragon, chives, oregano. For a year after her death I tried to keep it all going, but my thumbs are not green. The herbs and pots are gone now. I left the hooks, too lazy to deal with spackling over the holes they'd leave if I pulled them down. I hardly notice them anymore.

Alicia liked Donna Lombardi. They'd have coffee at the diner pretty often, and sometimes they'd shop at the mall out on the highway. Donna liked country music and read only the local paper; Alicia filled the house with opera and chamber music and was a member of five book clubs. She was on the board of our public library for years, until she was too ill to continue. I always thought their friendship was odd, but Alicia said she and Donna had seriousness in common. What that meant, I believe, is that each applied herself completely to the work at hand, whatever it might be. This is why Donna remained at the mayor's office through several administrations. And why our home had been for so long a fragrant, clean and scrupulously organized incarnation of my wife's own spirit, so perfect that I woke for weeks following her death into the certainty that she was still with me. It was the dust that finally convinced me she was gone, and the silence: sitting at the kitchen table with my tea on that morning after I collapsed in the auditorium, I remembered standing at the shelf in the living room where Alicia's record player had somehow grown an implausible fur of minute gray particles. I rubbed a finger through it and could see, through the clean trail my finger left, the label of the last record she'd played.

The tea in my cup was cold. I poured it into the sink and called Dan Barry on the kitchen phone. He was out, so I called the diner. Walt answered after several rings.

"Walt, it's Ed," I said. "Do you know if Tina's out at the hospital, or if she's in town somewhere?"

"She's there," he said. There was an edge in his voice, impatience or anger. "One of Rick's guys drove her, that bastard Steve Hall. I don't know when she'll be back, if you want to see her. I'd imagine there's paperwork to do. You'd know better than me."

I asked if he was all right.

"God damn it, Doc, I know you're supposed to be resting," he said. "But can I tell you something now?"

"Sure."

"Tina was out last night with that cop, the one she's with now. All night."

At the time I didn't see his point. Was he angry at a nineteen-year-old girl for having a boyfriend, or was it this boyfriend in particular? Granted, Hall was an unpleasant man...

"You don't find that a little convenient?" Walt said, and then, "Look, I got customers and no help today. You have to rest. Let's talk tomorrow." He hung up the phone.

It took a minute. But when I saw what he was getting at – *convenient* – something else came back to me, a question about the night the Town Hall vanished. I called Dan Barry again. This time he was in.

"Why didn't the PD lose anybody when the Town Hall disappeared?" I asked him. "There had to be a dispatcher, at least."

The Fire Chief grunted into the phone, a disgusted sound. "Oh, that's a dirty little secret, Doc," he said. "There was nobody there. The Chief figures he saves money by not staffing overnight, so phone calls are routed to the dispatcher's house and she calls direct to guys on duty when something comes in."

"That can't amount to much of a savings," I said. "It would be what, some lights and a pot of coffee? And the calls coming in at the dispatcher's house all night when the husband and kids are trying to sleep..."

"It's a quiet town, Doc. One call in the wee hours, maybe two. Those overnight cops get a lot of sleep in their cars."

I thanked him for the information. Then one more question occurred to me, and I asked if the pills Donna had taken were prescription or over the counter.

"I don't know, Doc. I'm the Fire Chief, right?"

He had a point. "Right."

"Want to tell me what all this is about?" he asked.

"If I figure that out you'll be the first person I call," I promised.

I hung up the phone and went upstairs to shower, trying not to think. Sometimes this works pretty well and I truly clear my mind, achieving something like a Zen state of meditation, no thoughts allowed. It's a skill Alicia taught me, learned from a slew of books she'd laid in one winter about various religious and philosophical traditions. Thoughts can flit through my mind, through the steam of the shower as I soap up and rinse and wash my hair, but I don't attach to them. Just lather, rinse, repeat. Buddhist wisdom, right there on the shampoo bottle. Later, I let the thoughts come back and they settle into their natural order.

Washed, dried and dressed again I put a Deutsche Grammophone Beethoven on the living room stereo and took a kitchen chair onto the front porch. I could hear the music through

the open windows. The morning was already hot, but the sun hadn't quite banished all the shade from the porch and I sat sheltered by the roof and a huge rhododendron that Alicia had kept in check but which I allowed to grow freely, anarchic. *The Emperor Symphony* behind me, a berserker plant before me: order and chaos, each lovely in its way.

Those overnight cops get a lot of sleep in their cars. That's what my friend the Fire Chief says. But he's always peevish when he speaks of the police, and it could be this blinds him to certain truths. For example, that it might be better for all of us these days if our police did in fact sleep through the nights. John Dwight would think so. And Rick Murray's having no one at the Town Hall overnight, when did that start? It's so very convenient, to use Walt Sherman's word, that he lost no one when Kathy Dwight went missing with the building. And then with Kathy gone, Rick's buddy Fred Wheeling suddenly moves to become mayor without benefit of an election, or at least without a real election.

And Kathy's secretary. My wife's friend, Donna. A woman with no history of mental illness or emotional problems apparently tries to kill herself one night but is saved by her daughter, only to succeed at suicide weeks later while her daughter is – conveniently – out all night with a local policeman. And what's going on with these plans to rebuild on the Town Hall site? It makes sense to rebuild, but Wheeling's attitude about it is disturbing. Why so secretive? I had to wonder if Mo Patel and Bill Fallon of the Planning office were really comfortable with the way things were being handled.

Thinking about it all together like this, with Wheeling's incredible Huey Long performance at the high school a fresh and still disorienting memory, I felt the terrible silent gravity of that tall fence just blocks away from my home. Something had gone wrong at the center of things. So much was happening that couldn't be seen. Yet all the while our local media sounded not the mildest alarm, serving up instead a gleaming vision of Fred Wheeling as a kind of home-grown savior. And reporters from outside were almost entirely absent at this point; the only non-local print or TV people anyone had seen since the first few days of the crisis met only with Wheeling and Murray, or briefly chatted with the men in the black SUVs. No good would come of that. Propaganda and "no comment" were not going to pierce the veil.

I began to feel lightheaded and noticed that the sun had stealthily claimed the porch, leaving me no place of refuge from the heat. I stood carefully and went back inside. In the kitchen I poured a glass of water, and I sat on the couch in the living room to drink it. Beethoven hailed the glory of Napoleon; it was an action he came to regret. He even changed the name of the

symphony to "Eroica," but the impulse behind it was known and "Emperor" stuck, a badge of shame to last through centuries.

But wait. I had to rein myself in. Was I actually thinking that *Fred Wheeling* had somehow spirited away not just John and Kathy Dwight, but also a three story, ninety-seven year old building, complete with full basement, *and* possibly conspired with the Police Chief and some of his officers in the murder of Donna Lombardi? Had the incontrovertible fact of one impossible occurrence so unhinged my mind and fractured my grip on reality that paranoia had gotten in, like some opportunistic bacteria?

You're supposed to be an intelligent man, I told myself. Rational, analytical. It's probably why Wheeling and Murray don't like you on their committees and at their crime scenes. So in the name of reason, step back and stay sane.

My day of calm and recuperation was not going so well.

Ellie came by in the afternoon. The girls were at a summer day camp and Pete was at the garage. I got us some tea and we sat in the kitchen.

"You look good," she said. "Your color's back. Last night you looked like death."

I thanked her for the image. "Don't go sharing it around, though. There may be another physician or two around that people would prefer to Dr. Death."

She was quiet and stirred some honey into her cup.

"I know about Donna Lombardi," I said.

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "I'm scared," she said. We looked at each other.

I reached across the table and rested my hands on hers. "It's okay to be scared," I said. "I'm scared, too. But you've got the girls to take care of, and -"

It was an accident, honestly. I'd meant to respect her decision to put off telling me, whatever the reason. I was hurt by it, yes. But I knew she'd have told me in time.

"You know," she said, reading the unspoken words in my eyes.

"By accident. It was -"

"Pete told you."

"Yes, but he'd been drinking. It was the other night at dinner, with all the wine."

She nodded, and moved her hands to hold her teacup. "Yeah, that makes sense," she said. She sipped the tea, steam clouding her brown eyes. "He was strange that night, like he'd done something he didn't want me to know about. Are you mad at me?"

"No," I said. "I wondered why you didn't tell me."

She smiled. "I was going to eventually, of course. Soon, before I start to show."

"Nice to keep your doctor informed."

She set the cup down and frowned at me. "It's not like I haven't been through this before. I know how to care for myself and a baby."

"How long?" I asked.

"Just a few weeks. Two home tests confirmed it."

I waited.

"It wasn't planned," she told me.

We drank some tea. I got us some sugar cookies and she ate one to my two.

"Are you all right?" I said.

"In what way?"

"Do you want this baby?"

She wasn't shocked by the question. "We were going to have just the two," she said. "And you know, with all the shit that's going on in this town, I don't know if any of us should be here, to be honest."

The fear she'd shown earlier returned to her face for a moment, struggling with anger. She let anger win. "I want to *hurt* someone," she said, leaning forward on the table and nodding in agreement with the words. She laughed in disbelief and fell back in her chair. "And I'm a pacifist!"

I watched as she stared at the ceiling, then at the window. Finally she finished her tea and met my eyes again. "It's all impossible," she said.

"I know."

"It can't be."

"Some things that can't be happen anyway. Think of the platypus."

Her face went blank and she stared at me. Then she laughed, a loud, genuine laugh that soon had her wiping her eyes and resting her head on both hands, elbows planted on the table. She looked at me and shook her head.

"Thanks for that," she said. "The platypus."

"You're welcome," I said. "It is a funny sucker."

She promised to begin the regular prenatal schedule of appointments and examinations. She was sure that her fall in the high school hadn't done any harm, but I said we'd do an ultrasound anyway and she agreed. It was the atmosphere of the meeting that night that had frightened her more than anything, and I understood that completely. I didn't tell her anything of the thoughts that had occupied my day.

After Ellie left I gathered the materials for a decent dinner from the refrigerator and enjoyed a small salad with some parmesan and sweet peppers. I considered checking the evening news on television but issued a doctor's order against it, choosing instead to remain in the kitchen and think for myself. No matter how hard I

tried, though, I could not persuade myself that the situation was any less horrific than it had seemed before.

People are dying, I told myself. Real people with names and families are being deliberately killed, here in this town.

I knew it was true. As Ellie said, it couldn't be; but like anything you can't imagine until the evidence can't be denied, like a building that's there one day and gone the next, or an absence in your home suddenly given shape by the track of a fingertip through dust, the reality doesn't depend on what your mind can accept. It's simply there, and whether you adjust to it or not is a matter of no consequence at all unless reality and truth have some meaning in your life. In which case you have an obligation to adjust, and to deal with things.

And deal with them well. It was Nietzsche who wrote the warning: When you look long into an abyss, the abyss looks back. And that answering look, he knew, can pull you over the edge, down into emptiness, into the void.

To your own deepest darkness.

I made some notes on the pad I keep beside the kitchen phone. The next day, I would start making calls and gathering information. But for the remainder of my day of rest, it would be Brahms and a good, thick book. One of the Russians, maybe. Or Zola. Or Steinbeck. Someone with a good heart and a clear eye. One of the good guys.



Ellie stood in my office at ten o'clock on Thursday morning and looked concerned. There had been three requests to transfer patient records to other doctors, she told me, along with three appointment cancellations.

I'd just placed a call to County Hospital and was waiting for a call back. "We'll ride it out," I said. "If people want to try someone else a while, I can't stop them."

"But you know there's something going on. Someone's *doing* this."

I didn't know what to say. Walt Sherman's diner traffic was way down, too, and Pete was finding himself with empty time at his garage. I hadn't heard anything about Nick Das' legal practice, but the smart money would be on him feeling the chill, as well. Helen Connelly was a local eccentric, a retired librarian and perennial councilwoman of independent means, courtesy of a late husband. I'd have to talk with her, see what form the blacklist was taking in her life.

"I won't run after patients to bring them back," I told Ellie. "I've been at this a long time. People know me. Fred Wheeling's crew

can badmouth me all they want, but people will remember. Give it time.”

Ellie shook her head angrily, folding her arms across her chest. She stood as if she would stay right there forever. “Which people are you talking about? Those people at the gym the other night?”

She was thinking of the chanting, the stomping, the whistles. Of herself sprawled on the floor, of Pete stunned in the auditorium lights as Fred Wheeling stalked the stage and all but denounced him by name as a threat to the safety of every home and family in town. Of me, later that evening.

“Ellie, I’m waiting for a call,” I said impatiently, glancing at the phone. I spread my hands over the few folders on the desk. “And I’ve got other things to do. Let me know when the next appointment is here, all right?”

She blinked several times and the decisive set of her shoulders wavered. She lingered long enough to convey that she was leaving of her own accord, then was gone from the room in a rush, leaving me the image of her shock and the hurt in her eyes.

The top folder was Donna Lombardi’s file. I was reading it through again, Ellie’s disbelieving face crowding the dates and details for space in my brain, when the incoming call light flashed on the phone. I picked up the receiver.

“County Hospital returning your call,” Ellie said, sharply.

Five minutes later I signed into one of the many online databases I pay for and discovered that in the last five years no one had prescribed for Donna Lombardi the drug that was in her system when she’d died. I looked at Tina’s prescription record and found nothing relevant there, and to cover all bases I pulled the file of Donna’s late husband and examined that, too. It turned out that the particular sleep aid Donna had taken was not even available at the time of Michael’s death.

It was, however, the drug I’d prescribed for John Dwight just weeks ago.

I called Nick Das.

At my house that evening, Nick and I discussed what I’d learned. Ellie and Pete Chase, Helen Connelly, and Dan Barry were there, too, as was Walt Sherman. We’d been made a group by circumstance and it no longer seemed right for me to withhold information from anyone. Nick sat in my wingback chair, the rest on the couch and sofa. A pitcher of iced tea, two glasses and a few cans of beer were on the coffee table. I’d brought in a chair from the kitchen for myself.

Nick sat upright with his hands folded on his lap. He’d left his courtroom suits at home and wore a red polo shirt and jeans. He had one leg crossed over the other at the knee and an expensive running shoe bobbed up and down as he listened, going still when

he spoke. He was a dedicated runner; I saw him in the office once a year for a physical, and his brown calves were thick with muscle. He ran six miles a day around town, three before dawn and three in the evening. Sometimes on weekends he ran twelve or fifteen miles on the hilly trails at the state park. His two teenaged sons would join him, but they couldn't keep up. I would tease them about it during their own checkups, though they were in fine shape themselves.

"If we approach the District Attorney," Nick said, his eyes making a circuit of the faces in the room, "we are making a public statement. You must realize this."

No one spoke. I nodded, so did Pete. Ellie focused intently on Nick, one hand resting on Pete's knee. She hadn't spoken to me or met my eyes since they'd arrived nearly a half hour before.

"I must tell you that we have no chance of indicting anyone, or empanelling a grand jury," Nick continued. His voice was dispassionate, clinical. "What we have, at present, is one missing man and one dead woman. The latter has been ruled a suicide by the county coroner. The letter received by Mr. Chase implicating police in Mr. Dwight's case is anonymous and could be a fabrication. Some kind of sick joke. The fact that Mr. Dwight had been prescribed medication that Mrs. Lombardi ingested prior to her death but had not been prescribed is odd, yes, but there could be any number of explanations. The police records of both cases are open; I can request them tomorrow and see if Mr. Dwight's prescription bottle was found in his house, and whether or not it is presently in the police evidence room as it should be or has likewise disappeared. Or perhaps it was found in Mrs. Lombardi's home. But even if that connection can be made, persuading the District Attorney that a police officer transported the drugs from one house to the other, and perhaps compelled Mrs. Lombardi to ingest pills prior to placing her in her car and starting the engine in her garage, would be impossible. Unless there is more evidence. Unless there is a witness."

"Maybe we can get Rick Murray to have the note analyzed," Pete said, dejected. "He can tell us who typed it."

Despite Pete's sarcasm, Nick looked interested. "There could be something to learn about the printer and possibly the computer that was used," he said. "I may know someone who can look into it."

"I'll bring you the note tomorrow," Pete said.

"The note's not *all* we've got," Walt said. "What about Steve Hall keeping Tina out of the house?" He waved his hands in exasperation. "We *know* what happened here, screw the note. You're ignoring the whole, overall situation!"

Nick sighed and bit his lower lip. "The larger context is the other factor to consider," he said. "Frankly, nothing we say is going to be heard by anyone until there's some resolution of those other issues."

"Meaning that Fred Wheeling can use the Town Hall and Mayor Dwight to grab power for himself," Ellie said, "because no one can think about anything else until we know what happened to them."

Nick nodded.

"Even if it means people die," Walt said.

"Are we sure that's what's going on, though?" Dan Barry's expression was pained, and I realized that he'd been largely ignorant of the possibilities we were discussing. Of us all he was the only one who didn't attend the council meeting at the high school, and that experience, I knew, had left a permanent impression on myself and the rest. "I mean, step back a minute. I know Rick Murray, and I know Fred Wheeling. Now, Fred's an asshole and Rick is not my favorite person, he can be a mean son of a bitch. But you're talking about going to the District Attorney and accusing them of murder? John Dwight might not be dead. Donna Lombardi tried to kill herself before."

"Maybe," Ellie said.

"Come on! If someone tried to kill her the first time, you think she wouldn't have said so?"

Walt stood from the couch with effort, holding his low back to help lift his bulk. "She had a daughter," he said to Barry. "And Rick Murray's nastiest prick of a cop is hanging around her. She's sending him messages all day at the diner, I've seen it. She doesn't have a clue what's going on."

"Shit, Walter, neither do you!" Barry said. He got up, too, and stood in the center of the room. "I can't listen to this, I'm sorry," he said. "It's nuts, to be honest with you all." He spread his arms. "I like you people, I respect you. But Jesus Christ, you've got yourselves worked up into a sick conspiracy story instead of being focused on what we really have to worry about. The Town Hall's gone! The mayor's gone." He lowered his arms. "Her husband, too, and *that* looks like a murder or a kidnapping, I'm with you there. But you're saying the police did it, because of a *note*? The police killed Donna Lombardi? They're all working for Fred Wheeling, a goddamn *real estate* guy?"

Barry looked at each of us in turn. Nick was impassive, Walt pissed. Pete Chase met the Fire Chief's gaze for a moment and glanced away. Ellie stared at the floor. Helen Connelly sat with her head tilted, flicking absently with a finger at one dangling seashell earring.

"Well, good night," Barry said. He looked at me once more, then turned and walked quickly to the door and out, closing it behind himself.

Nick frowned when he'd left and looked at me. "We have to be careful," he said.

I nodded.

Walt stared at the door. "Might be a little late for that," he said.

Helen Connelly stood from the sofa. She took my hand and narrowed her pale green eyes gravely. "Doctor," she said, "the iced tea has been lovely. What else you got?"

I poured the drinks and Helen ferried them from the kitchen to the living room. Pete and Nick had scotch, Walt opted for bourbon. Ellie resisted Helen's urging and said that iced tea was fine. Helen herself discovered a forgotten bottle of schnapps in the cabinet and I poured her a generous double shot. I splashed a bit of the bourbon in a glass and rejoined the group, sitting again on the kitchen chair I'd placed by the sofa.

"To the good people in this room, and the rule of law," Helen said, raising her glass. She held it up until we'd all lifted our own. "Prosit."

We sipped and sat. I thought about Dan Barry. I should have talked with him before this gathering, or maybe I shouldn't have invited him at all. But how could I not invite him? I'd known him longer than anyone in the room. He'd thought of me when the emergency committee was formed, and he was my only support when Fred Wheeling attacked my membership. I should have told him more of what was happening. I should have trusted him more.

"I've begun the process of challenging Fred Wheeling's claim to the mayor's office," Nick Das said. He set his glass on the table and sat back in the chair again, crossing one leg over the other. "I've notified the county and the state that I will file a formal complaint, as well as a request for an injunction against his assuming the title or exercising the powers of the office." This time Nick's hands were more animated, not folded on his lap. He shifted in the chair as he spoke, as if he'd rather be up and moving about the room. It may have been the scotch, or it may have been that now he was speaking in an active mode, whereas much of what he'd said earlier concerned impediments to action and things we couldn't expect to happen.

"It's a legal process, so it will take time," he explained. "The complaint must be drafted in terms of what the town charter has to say about replacing a mayor, and about the conduct of elections. I expect to file within a week, but after that the process is going to move slowly, because it's an unusual situation and because Wheeling will have counsel doing whatever can be done to impede it."

"But you expect the election to be voided," Helen said.

"Oh yes, the final decision is not in doubt."

Walt Sherman finished his drink and rocked forward on the couch to put his own glass on the coffee table beside Nick's. He exhaled heavily, rubbing his forehead. "In the meantime, nothing's changed," he said. "The dead are dead. The missing are missing. And unless we're wrong – and at this point I'd dearly love to think we are, but I can't – we've got no reason to think more of this crap won't happen."

"We do what we can do," Ellie said. She thanked Nick for his good work, and the rest of us added our own thanks, Walt included.

That night I slept poorly, waking in sweat despite the air conditioning and bothered by anxious dreams. I remember only one. I'm at Walt's diner with his chessboard in front of me. Walt's not there; there's no one else in the place at all. But I feel a presence in the booth. There's something on the other side of the table, on the far side of the board, waiting. I should be able to see it. I squint and try just one eye, then the other, but it won't appear. I reach across the table and my hand encounters nothing. Still, there's a game on. I have to play.

On the board I see an impossible situation. Black has massed its pieces near mid-board, two rows in advance of where play should begin. Just one square separates the front rank of my opponent's force from my own, and I'm startled to see that horses and rooks comprise this aggressive vanguard. My own front line is conventional, a row of pawns. I reach to move a horse of my own into the open space, and find I have none. All sixteen white pieces are pawns.

Before I left for the office on Friday morning, the telephone rang. It was Dan Barry.

"I was asked to tell you that the emergency committee has been disbanded," he said. "So no meeting today."

I remembered my promise to Fred Wheeling that I would remain on the committee to watch him. "How can it be disbanded?" I said. "Did the emergency end overnight?"

"Things are being handled by the appropriate departments," Barry said, sounding tired. He was giving me the same line he'd been given, that was clear. "The Mayor decided the committee's no longer necessary."

"And you're all right with this," I said, expecting him to snap back at me. I was feeling edgy after my restless night and his quiet sarcasm sounded too much like resignation. I wanted him indignant. I wanted him on my side again.

"It is what it is," he said. "I'm the Fire Chief. He's the Mayor."

There was irritation in his voice. But no more than that. I realized then, with a near physical sensation of increasing distance, that he would never acknowledge the threat around him. The new reality was too much to accept; he would not, perhaps could not, adjust to it. He lived instead in an earlier world, where nothing impossible happened and the heaviest burden you had to bear was working for a man you considered an asshole.

"Well," I said, "thanks for telling me." I hesitated to hang up the phone, not knowing when we would speak again. "And Dan, about yesterday –"

"Forget it," he told me. "I wasn't there. I don't know what went on. Leave it at that."

We left it at that. I walked to the office in the damp morning heat hoping that my next apology would not mark the end of a friendship.

The list of appointments might have been acceptable on my first day of practice thirty-three years ago, when I could expect more each day rather than less; Ellie watched me read it from behind her desk.

"Grim," I said.

"Cross off Annie Ellison at ten," Ellie said. "I'm transferring her records to Dr. Miyawaki's office."

Ken Miyawaki was a good doctor and a good man. He was also married to Councilman Andy Slavitski's sister.

"I wonder where Walt's breakfast crowd is going?" I said. Maybe Rick Murray's second cousin had opened a pancake shop.

Ellie didn't respond. The question would have been a non sequitur to her, maybe a sign of encroaching senile dementia.

"Got a minute?" I said.

We sat in the waiting area on blue vinyl couches. Between us was a low table strewn with magazines, the mailing labels on their covers addressed to me. With no patients due for an hour we'd have the privacy we needed, and I didn't feel entitled to the superior position that my own office conferred, with its framed diplomas and enormous oak barge of a desk.

"I didn't know I subscribed to *Teen Miss*," I said. I flipped a few pages, let the magazine close. I looked at Ellie, at her pretty young face made pale by fractured sleep. "I'm sorry I insulted you," I said. "You know how important you are to me."

Ellie sat far back on the couch, arms slack at her sides. She wore sandals, a pair of olive green shorts, a sleeveless white blouse. Her head rested on the wall behind the couch. It was too soon for the air conditioning to take full effect; I'd told her she could leave it set overnight as it was during the day, but she thought that would be wasteful. A trickle of sweat ran down my back under my shirt. Tiny beads of moisture glistened on Ellie's

forehead and above her upper lip. There were lines in the skin on each side of her mouth, and beside her eyes.

"I wonder, sometimes," she said. "I'm not sure you understand how much..."

She let the thought go.

"I know how much you do," I said. "For me, for the practice. And with everything going on now, all this insanity, and Pete under attack and being pregnant –"

She smiled. "Pete's not pregnant."

It was good to see the smile. "Sure he is," I said. "That's how it is now, you say 'We're pregnant,' so it's an equal proposition."

"Oh, it's not equal," she said, moving her hands to her stomach.

"No," I said. "It's never been." Suddenly I was very afraid for her. She was so tired, so... slumped. Vulnerable. "You need to rest," I said. "Let me apologize by giving you a week or two off."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, smiling again. "You can't do that."

"Why? Am I going to lose patients?"

She talked me out of the plan and accepted my apology anyway. "Let's see how long we can keep you in business," she said. Then she was quiet a moment. "Can you nudge the air conditioner a little?"

I got up and went behind her desk, adjusted the thermostat on the wall. When I settled again on my couch she looked at me steadily, not smiling. "You look older," she said.

"I didn't sleep well," I confessed. "And I talked with Dan Barry this morning. He told me the emergency committee's disbanded. To get rid of me, I suppose."

"He's upset with you, isn't he."

I nodded. "He doesn't get it, Ellie. He doesn't see what's going on."

She swallowed. "We're going to get it, though," she said. "Don't you think?"

A jolt of pure fear ran through me. "No," I said. "We'll be fine. Nothing is going to happen to us, to you and your family."

Something strange happened in her eyes. She seemed to withdraw from the room, to some other scene in her mind. "I thought about asking Pete to resign from the council," she said.

"Maybe you should. He'd do it for you."

Her eyes were still there, in that other place. "I know," she said.

But whatever she saw there, in that alternate space where they were just another couple raising children in Fred Wheeling's town, it didn't make her smile.

I had dinner with Walt at the diner. Bobby Taylor, the cook, joined us at the table. We didn't talk much. Sometime around seven a patrol car drove by and parked half a block away outside the Continental Hotel. Two others and a black SUV were already there.

"Must be a meeting," I observed, pointing with my fork.

Walt turned to look. We watched Steve Hall get out of the car and cross the sidewalk to the hotel. "The new emergency committee," Walt said.

Beside me, Bobby Taylor chuckled. "God save us," he said.

A much anticipated break in the torrid temperatures and humidity arrived late Friday night with a storm that blew through from the west. When I woke on Saturday at seven a.m. the rain had stopped and just a few wispy clouds floated high in the atmosphere. A breeze blew.

I turned off the air conditioning and opened every window in the house. Sitting with the morning paper in the kitchen I could smell the honeysuckle that grew beside the driveway and hear the first distant drone of a lawn mower as some eager citizen attacked a task long made inconceivable by the awful heat. The lead article in the newspaper detailed the afternoon's Fourth of July parade route, pointedly still beginning at the Town Hall site. A color photo showed bunting on the tall metal wall that circled the pit, and Fred Wheeling standing beneath it with "Honorary Parade Grand Marshall Tina Lombardi, whose mother's tragic death is attributed to depression brought on by recent events." By midday, I knew, the drone of that single mower would become a roar. Not a street in town would remain quiet, as the wordless voice of one machine called to another, that one to two more, those two to a dozen. The grinding clamor would grow by the hour until mid-afternoon, when families began to leave their homes for the parade route along Main; then it would slide back along the slope of its rising until just one or two stubborn grumblings remained, finishing the last square foot of lawn behind the garage, that invisible patch in the shade behind the pool. It would begin again tomorrow, when the barbecues, marching bands and fireworks of this bread-and-circus Fourth were already faded memories, bare traces of puppet patriotism on taste buds, retinas, eardrums. It was an annual routine, this year made horrible by a nightmarish context.

I am not ready for this day, I thought.

But it wasn't the day that should have worried me. There was an endgame in motion, and we learned it that night.

Pete and Ellie went to the parade, because their girls were marching as members of a High Achievers club at their elementary school. Walt was at the diner all day, as usual. What Nick Das and his family were doing I don't know. Helen Connelly knocked at my

front door at three in the afternoon; the parade was underway by then and I'd been organizing some papers in the welcome quiet of the afternoon in my part of town. There were folders and envelopes spread across a good part of the living room floor, and two white cardboard document boxes with their lids off, empty.

"It appears that you have a project," Helen said.

"Just some things I've needed to have a look at," I said. "It's been... it's been a while."

She nodded. "I'd bet your patient's files are in much better shape than your own."

"That's because I have Ellie," I said. "Alicia used to handle this stuff here at the house."

"You have no children," she said.

"No, it's just me."

"I won't keep you long," she said. She looked away from the floor and the papers there, as if to avoid an impropriety. "May we speak on the porch?"

"Of course." I held the door. Her hair as she passed smelled of lavender, and was gray to the scalp. It was pulled back and secured at the nape of her neck with a bright red ladybug clasp, big as an apple. She wore a tan cotton vest over a long-sleeved white shirt, a faded denim skirt and hiking boots. From her ears dangled a pair of tiny pewter shoes, Monopoly pieces. We didn't talk on the porch, as it happened, because she walked right across it and down the three front steps without a pause, and I followed her out to the sidewalk, where she turned left and continued walking. Our conversation took us down the street to the corner and back, then down the driveway and into the yard. I don't think she was aware of our surroundings at any time, except for once when she complimented Alicia's hydrangeas, which manage to thrive under the same laissez faire regime that has served the rhododendron and honeysuckle so well.

Helen told me something no one else had. She told me that John Dwight had spoken with Nick Das about suing the town for defamation of his wife's character, in response to Fred Wheeling's constant insinuations. As a city councilman, Nick told John he couldn't advise him on this, but he did refer him to another attorney.

"And did he talk to someone else?" I asked. This could be a motive for making John disappear, I thought. Something Nick might take to the District Attorney, if another lawyer would corroborate that John was thinking of filing suit.

"I don't know," Helen said. "But if he did and word of it got to Wheeling..."

A lawsuit like that could certainly have caused Wheeling significant trouble. Deflecting the attacks of three other politicians

was easy for a man like Fred; just point at the hole where Town Hall used to be and accuse them of playing politics with public safety. But the presumptive widower of a missing woman, even if the woman herself was a politician? I wondered why Nick hadn't told me about this, or told Pete Chase, at least. Then I thought, maybe he did tell Pete. He must have told Helen.

And Helen was warning me. Like John Dwight, I was outside the circle where politics was played. And also like John, I was looking for ways to affect the outcome of the game.

Kathy and John might both be in the woods outside town somewhere, or in that very deep hole surrounded by metal and guarded by Rick Murray's police. A new basement may have already been poured there, the details of the rebuild known to just a few, as a matter of security. Wherever the disappeared had gone, any of us could follow. Outsiders like me perhaps easiest of all. That was Helen's message.

We walked back up the driveway to the sidewalk.

"I'll let you get back to your papers," she said. "You know, I do have children, and grandchildren as well. But they're all grown now, and they've all gone far away."

She smiled with her mouth only. "Be well, Dr. Miller," she said.

"You too, Helen," I said.

In the house I continued putting my files in order.



I think now of dominoes falling. Kathy. John. Donna. Nick.

Pete Chase shouted my name through the living room's screen door. Hurrying from the kitchen I saw his car in my driveway near the street, the dome light on, driver's door open. "Nick Das is hurt," he said. I got my emergency kit from the hall closet and followed him to the car.

"He fell off the trail bridge over the dry creek out by the park," Pete told me as he drove north on Main, speeding through a red light and swerving around another car as it entered the intersection. "I don't know if it's his head or his back or what but it's bad. Helen Connelly heard it on the police band, first they said there was a jogger hurt and then they said it was him."

"There's an ambulance at the park tonight," I said.

"Right. Because of the fireworks."

"They'd be closest and take the call."

He turned onto Mill Creek Road but turned again quickly onto a short side street, Lawton. We were less than a mile from the main entrance to the park. "I don't want Nick taken anywhere before you get to see him," he said.

At the end of Lawton an ambulance and a patrol car were parked, lights flashing. The rear doors of the ambulance were open, but there was no one in either vehicle. Pete parked at the foot of a driveway and we got out of the car, watched by a few people standing outside their homes. "Nick told me he'd be at the park tonight," Pete said as we moved around the ambulance and down a shallow embankment to the trail along the creek. "People expect us to be there, and his kids wanted to go, too."

The creek bed was dry now; the creek was re-routed in the early 1980s because of development a mile or so upstream from the three-foot wide hikers' bridge, built a decade earlier at the height of the environmental movement. With no water beneath it the bridge served no real purpose anymore, aside from sparing hikers a steep descent of twelve feet or so and a corresponding climb up the other side. I knew the spot from my own bygone days as a hiker, in company with Alicia. It would be hard to fall from the bridge, it seemed to me, unless the three foot high side rails had somehow been removed.

The trail ran through a wooded area at this point, so it was hard to see as night came on. But the policeman who stood looking down from the bridge up ahead to our left had the height and build of Steve Hall.

I ignored him and carefully sidestepped down the slope to the dry creek bed. Two paramedics were crouched beside a man who lay silent and unmoving on a patient transport. One looked up as I approached.

"It's a fatality, Doctor," he said. "No response to verbal or tactile, pupils fixed, no breathing or heart sounds. Skull trauma, compound fracture right forearm." I recognized him and the other EMT. They'd been on the job for years, five or six at least.

The body lay face up, head cradled in a padded, u-shaped immobilizer. I knelt beside it and felt for a pulse in the neck, knowing there would be none. Blood had soaked the pad beneath the dead man's head and shone in his thick black hair. He wore a gray t-shirt, jeans and expensive running shoes.

A flash of white light threw the shadows of the leaves above across the corpse and gleamed briefly in Nick's wide, staring eyes. The pop of the fireworks came next, and the answering cheer from the crowd at the park became a volley of booming, party-colored explosions. The EMTs fastened straps across Nick's chest and legs, and the backs of my hands flared blue, red and gold as I closed his eyes. I waited until they'd pushed and pulled the transport up the bank to the trail before following. Pete Chase grabbed my arm to assist me the last few feet; Steve Hall looked on, his thick arms folded. Flickering in and out of darkness, the expression on his face was difficult to read. I may not have seen him smile.

I told Pete to go to his car and spoke briefly with the ambulance driver as his partner satisfied protocol and attached monitor leads to the body. He agreed that there was no need for me to go to the hospital. The monitor read flat, and after wiping my hands on a towel I signed off on the pronouncement of death. I stood aside as the ambulance backed into a driveway to turn around on the narrow street. Another patrol car was there now. Its driver was talking with some of the people who had been standing around when Pete and I arrived. Steve Hall didn't join him, instead sitting in his own car and turning off the roof lights. As I walked by I saw that he was punching some numbers on a cell phone.

Pete was quiet almost all the way back to my house. We were a block away when he finally spoke.

"Did he fall there?" he said, quietly. He didn't look at me, his eyes focused straight ahead. He was sitting rigidly upright, his hands tight on the steering wheel.

"Maybe," I said. "I don't think so."

Pete didn't ask me to explain. He left me at the house and told me he'd be in touch. He had to go get Ellie and the kids at the park.

I washed my hands and arms in the bathroom sink and took a shower. Feeling the back of my own skull I remembered the pulpy ruin of Nick's. Running the wash cloth over my right forearm I could feel the bones that had shattered and torn through Nick's skin. Even if the fall from the bridge to the dirt and stones beneath was enough to crush the back of a man's skull so badly, I couldn't make the broken forearm work. Could it have snapped against the bridge railing as Nick somehow stumbled over, or shattered when he hit the ground? I can't say either is impossible. But I had seen such forearm injuries before, and they were cases of violent assault. One, in fact, had been Pete Chase's arm, when he was beaten years ago by the two men he'd confronted in the park, protecting a girl who may otherwise have been raped. The most severe injury he'd suffered was a compound fracture of the right forearm, which he'd raised to block a tire iron swung at his head. I had also seen a mugging victim when I did my residency in the city who'd been attacked with a wrench or some similar tool.

Had Steve Hall been wearing a nightstick on his belt this evening? Every other time I'd seen him recently – going into the Continental, harassing Pete and Ellie in the high school parking lot, or looking as if he'd like to throw that news photographer into the Town Hall pit rather than hold onto him for safety as he leaned forward with his camera – he'd worn the stick on his belt along with his gun. Tonight, I didn't see it when I spotted him standing there on the bridge, and it wasn't on his belt when he got into his car later, when the ambulance left the scene.

Was I sure of this? Or was I only sure that I wanted to be?

After my shower I dressed and poured myself a drink. I had some trouble with the buttons of my shirt and the whiskey bottle shook so that I needed to sop up a spill on the kitchen counter with a towel. I drank slowly, standing at the sink.

A sweep of buttery light brushed the darkness from the driveway outside and lit the top of the honeysuckle that grew beneath the kitchen window. I couldn't see the vehicle that had pulled in off the street because of the lights, but when the engine stopped running I heard two doors open, and a child spoke softly and was answered by a woman. I had the front door open when Ellie and the girls stepped onto the porch.

The twins had been to the house before, but they never seemed quite comfortable with me. I am an old man and their family doctor and the man mommy works with; they stood uncertainly just inside the door as Ellie gripped me in a tight embrace. I could feel the tension in her, her heart hammering against my own chest. I held her until her breathing slowed and she nodded her head against my shoulder.

"I'm okay," she said. "I'm okay now."

I sat them all on the sofa and asked the girls if they wanted some apple juice. One said nothing, the other shook her head.

"That would be great," Ellie said, sitting between them with an arm around each. The girls have Ellie's clear skin and brown eyes. They are slender like their mother, but their hair is a darker blonde and their faces are longer, more like Pete's. They all wore shorts and sandals and sleeveless shirts, doubtless the same clothes they'd worn to the fireworks in the park.

I served the apple juice and then brought Ellie her own glass of amber liquid. I'd cut the bourbon with water, but just a little.

"Thanks," she said. She held the glass in both hands to sip.

The girls thanked me, too.

"You're all welcome," I said.

"Pete's gone to see Nick's family," Ellie said. "I told him we'd come here."

"I'm glad," I told her. "I'm glad Pete's doing that and I'm glad you're here."

The twins finished their juice. One put her glass on the coffee table and the other followed suit. "Can we go home now?" the first one asked Ellie.

"We have to wait for Daddy," Ellie said. "Dr. Miller, do you have any paper and pens?"

"Yes I do," I said. I went to the kitchen and divided the note pad beside the phone into two small stacks of pages. From the jumble of pens and pencils in the junk drawer I grabbed a handful.

Ellie settled the girls at the table and asked them to draw pictures of the fireworks while she and I talked in the living room.

I sat in the wingback chair and she sat on the sofa. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped abruptly, looking distressed.

"Ellie?" I said.

She lifted her glass from the coffee table and swallowed some of the whiskey. "I'm sorry," she said, "but... would you mind if we both sat here?"

I joined her on the sofa and only then, looking at the chair I'd just left, realized that the last time she had been in this room she sat where she was right now, and Nick Das had been in that chair.

"Thank you," she said. "I just - "

"I know."

She put her glass on the table. When she turned to me her expression was calm, composed. "Pete says you think it wasn't an accident."

"That's right. I don't know if I could prove it in court - "

"In court!" she said. She glanced toward the kitchen and lowered her voice. "I'm not worried about getting to court. I want to get my girls out of this alive. Did you hear about the trouble at the park?"

"You mean, besides Nick?"

"At the fireworks. There were some kids, teenagers from out of town, apparently. They had some big firecrackers and set them off in the crowd. There was something in one of the restrooms, too, a big explosion. I guess the police have been getting calls about carloads of strange kids the last few days, one of the dispatchers was talking about it. There's been some vandalism, cars stolen."

"Just what we need," I said. "Was anyone arrested?"

Ellie shook her head. "No. But you know the worst thing?"

I reached out and held her hand. "What, Ellie?"

"The worst thing is I don't know if I believe any of it. I never saw any gang of kids. The police say kids are doing it, but how can we trust them? Everything's so wrong now. I don't know what's real."

The danger is real, I was going to say. You have to get out of town. But instead I kept silent as a flashing red light filled the room, touching Ellie's stunned face, licking through the doorway into the kitchen, sliding noiseless along the far wall. I rose from the sofa and watched a police patrol car move slowly down the street, the red light lashing out across lawns and penetrating windows, leaving an invisible lasting mark like a spider's kiss where it touched. As the car rolled on into the next block, the night time houses shrank into deeper darkness behind.

An hour later, Pete knelt on the living room floor and held his daughters a little longer and a little tighter than they liked.

"Daddy, let go," one of the girls said.

"You're crushing me!" complained the other.

He let them go and they led him by his hands to the kitchen, where they showed him the pictures they'd drawn. Ellie stood behind him with her arms around his chest, resting her cheek against his shoulder. I poured him a drink and waited for them in the living room.

Pete sat with one of the twins on his knee and the other sitting close beside him on the couch, between him and Ellie. I sat on the sofa facing them.

"Nick's family is devastated, as you'd expect," Pete said. "I held the little girl for a while. She's four, she doesn't understand. Then the grandparents came... I just handed them the girl and left. There was nothing I could do."

Ellie was crying beside him. She reached along the back of the couch and stroked his hair.

"I didn't say anything there about what we think happened," Pete said.

"Of course not," I said. "It was good of you to go."

"I had to go. But then there was nothing I could do."

I nodded. How many times had I experienced that same impotence, the total inability to change things? I'm expected to heal and to cure, that's my function. But sometimes I can't do it. Sometimes no one can. New medicines, new treatments are always being created, and some of the injuries and diseases that kill today will be no match for the healers of the future. But it takes time. And meanwhile, people will die and families grieve.

"There are cop cars everywhere," Pete said. He set his glass down and lifted the child from his knee. She began to protest, but Pete looked at Ellie and she stood, taking both girls by the hand.

"Let's go look at the stars," she said.

She led the girls through the kitchen and the laundry room to the back yard. I heard the screen door open and close.

"Did Ellie tell you about the fireworks?" Pete asked me.

I told him that she had.

"If it's a carload of kids they're after, doc, those kids must be packing machine guns. It's like there's a cop on every street."

I told him a car had cruised by the house with its lights on.

"Right, but no sirens. That's what's so disturbing about it. Like sharks. A bunch of sharks just circling out there."

From the yard we heard the children laughing. Pete stood. "I better get everybody home," he said. He held out a hand and I shook it. His grip was strong, his hand callused. A laborer's hand. I was glad that his years in local politics hadn't softened it, and a bit ashamed that I'd ever faulted Ellie for loving and marrying him.

"I'll call tomorrow," I told him. "We'll see what this all looks like in the daylight."

Twenty minutes after Pete's car followed Ellie's down the street and out of sight, my telephone rang.

"Doc, it's Pete. There are cops all over the diner. Four, maybe five cars. I'd have stopped but not with Ellie and the kids. I can come by and get you in -"

"No, stay home," I told him. "I'll go myself. I'll call you."

I considered driving but decided that on foot I would be less conspicuous. It's a ten minute walk from my house to the diner, usually. This time my watch told me I made it in seven. I'd seen one patrol car along the way.

There were four of them outside the diner, their spinning lights like flames licking at the chrome deco exterior, seeking a way in. The fluorescents inside were on; I could see three uniformed policemen standing between the counter and the booths by the front windows, talking. I couldn't see Walt Sherman.

I'd thought for a long time that I could never be truly afraid again, that I was immune after enduring the long months of Alicia's illness and the terrifying emptiness that enclosed me when she died. But the events of late May and this horrific summer put the lie to my grim confidence. The blood on the wall of John Dwight's bedroom, the tall metal fence around the Town Hall pit, the high school auditorium a mad nightmare of shrieking whistles and stomping feet. Nick Das dead in the dark woods; Ellie's stunned expression as the probing light of a squad car moved across her face and reached for the kitchen where her children sat. I stood on the sidewalk outside the diner and I could not move. What new obscenity did this familiar structure hold? If I went in there now, would I come out again? I willed myself forward in vain; despite the persistent summer heat I was cold with fear.

One of the policemen in the diner saw me. He moved to the door and waved me inside.

Now my feet moved. I was relieved and ashamed. How unlike the chanting mass was I if my fear could make me a puppet, too frightened to act on my own sense of duty but responsive to another's commands? Inside the diner I faced three uniformed cops who looked at me and the bag in my hand with suspicion. I knew them all by name, but I no longer believed that I'd ever known more than a few human beings in any meaningful way. I knew about illnesses and broken bones, I knew which pills I'd prescribed. What did that tell me about anyone? If Walt was dead or hurt, any one of these outwardly respectable men could be responsible, or all of them.

"Where is he?" I said.

Dave Hurley tilted his head toward the door at the end of the counter. As I stepped toward the kitchen something snapped beneath my foot. It was a chess piece, a pawn. Several other pieces from the set lay scattered on the tile.

Another policeman was in the kitchen, leaning against a stack of cardboard boxes near the chair in which Walt sat, holding a blood-soaked dish towel to his mouth. The front of Walt's white shirt was also stained with blood. The chair, an old vinyl-covered office chair on wheels that Bobby Taylor used when there was no cooking to be done, creaked under Walt's weight as he looked up at me. The policeman nodded and returned my blank stare.

Walt said nothing as I moved his hand from his face and examined his injuries. Both his upper and lower lips were split and swollen, and he'd lost one of his front teeth. Another two were loose. The right side of his face was swollen and bruised, the eye nearly shut by the swelling. Blood had dried in his right ear, which was also puffed up.

I used antiseptic towels from my bag to clean the wounds and a penlight to check the pupils of his eyes for responsiveness. I asked if he had lost consciousness at all and he shook his head.

"You should go to the hospital now," I told him.

He stared at me and shook his head again.

"Have you called for an ambulance?" I asked the policeman.

"Mr. Sherman refused," he said.

"Your car out back?" I asked Walt.

He nodded.

I turned again to the policeman. "Does he need to be here any longer?"

"No, we've got a statement. Mr. Sherman, call the station before you come back in here and we'll send someone to be with you for security. Just in case."

As best he could with just his left eye, Walt glared at the man. I helped him from the chair and we left the diner through the back door.

There was one more patrol car in back of the diner, but its lights were off. Walt glanced at me as I stopped abruptly, but seeing no one in the car I started forward again.

"Must be one of the cops inside," I said.

I looked around the lot for a black SUV, but saw none.

Walt's Buick was parked under a light. He handed me the keys, and as I opened the passenger door Bobby Taylor was suddenly there to help him settle slowly onto the front seat. I don't know where or for how long Bobby had been waiting.

"Oh, they fucked you up good," he said.

With Bobby in back I drove to Walt's house on the east side of town. It was a two-bedroom brick bungalow on the southeast

corner of a street lined with identical homes, most of them now rentals and several standing vacant.

Bobby got Walt a glass of water and some ice cubes wrapped in a towel from the kitchen while I sat him in his recliner in the front room and gave him some painkillers. He took the glass from Bobby and managed to swallow the pills, spilling some of the water from his distended lips.

"It wasn't kids," he said, his voice distorted by swelling and pain.

Bobby stood by the closed front door, watching the street through its small square window. "That's what they telling you? It was those kids?" he said.

"I couldn't see them," Walt said. He tried to sit up straighter in the chair but grunted with pain and stayed as he was. "I was at the door. Locking up. They put something over my head."

"Kids more likely get right up in your face," Bobby said. "Cut you or shoot you, no muss no fuss."

"Three," Walt continued, holding up three fingers. "Two held me. One hit."

It was clearly painful for him to talk, and his lips bled freely again. The blood ran from the corners of his mouth and dripped onto his shirt.

"Walt, don't talk," I told him. "Let me see what I - "

He waved me away and dabbed at his mouth with the towel. "They *kicked* me," he said. His good eye filled with tears of anger. "Left me on the floor. "

At the door, Bobby Taylor hissed. "Should have killed you then."

"Damn right."

Walt forced himself up in the chair and rocked forward to stand. I reached to steady him as he tottered a moment. He moved past me like a much older man and opened the door of a closet. Pushing aside a few hanging jackets and a hooded winter coat, he reached into a grease-stained paper bag that rested on a shelf.

From the bag he took a box of bullets. From the box he extracted eight short, squat cartridges. He closed the box and returned it to the bag, and removed a large black revolver.

"Walter..." I began.

"Doc," Bobby Taylor said. He hadn't moved from his position at the door. I looked at him and he shook his head gravely.

I said nothing more. Walter finished loading the gun and closed the closet door. In his blood-streaked shirt, with his right eye just a slit in the swollen, greenish tissue of his face and his bloated purple lips still bleeding weakly, my old friend asked Bobby Taylor for help and together they dragged his recliner into the

corner by the closet. There he sat, revolver in hand, head turned so that his left eye squarely faced the front door of his home.

"Before I go," I offered, "let me close that cut on your face."

Walt nodded, and I used a butterfly suture to pull the edges of the wound together. When that was done I left painkillers, antiseptic towels and another butterfly suture on a table by the sofa.

Bobby picked up Walt's keys. "I'll drive you home," he said. That seemed best. From there I would be able to call Ellie, and I'd have my own car if I needed it.

As we crossed the room toward the door, Walt called my name. I turned.

"We should have told the D.A.... told everybody," he said. He sounded very tired. "We're cowards, all of us. It's our fault."

Driving back across town, Bobby avoided the main streets as much as possible and drove with the headlights off, taking corners very slowly in order to look ahead for police. It was past one in the morning now, and the effect of the increased patrols and rumors of a violent gang on the prowl had suppressed non-police traffic all but completely. We saw one other private car and three patrol cars. No one, it seemed, saw us.

Bobby stopped at the curb two blocks from my house, as we'd agreed. Somewhere in the distance, a siren began to wail, and soon there were others.

"Are you going back?" I asked. I didn't think he should. But Bobby seemed to know Walt at least as well as I did.

"Not tonight," he said. "The man was beat and left for dead, I'm not going near him before dinner time tomorrow."

"Give him a chance to sleep," I said, agreeing with the decision.

"Or shoot somebody else. The man's got cause."

I didn't dispute the point. "Be careful getting home, Bobby."

"I'll manage all right. This kind of thing ain't real big news to everybody, you know." He turned the car in the middle of the street and drove back the way we'd come.

I walked quickly home, feeling far too visible and exposed despite the darkness. The sight of the glowing porch light on my own house pulled me forward at a run. As I opened the screen door a folded piece of paper fluttered out and rested on my shoe. It was a Fire Department report sheet, blank except for a handwritten note: *Call me.*

On the answering machine in the bedroom, a message from Pete Chase saying the same. A message from Ellie, sounding very worried: Please call.

No one answered the Chase's phone. I tried Ellie's cell and was transferred to voice mail. "I'm home," I said, trying to keep my own voice steady. "I'm all right. Call back." It was 2:15 a.m.

Dan Barry was unavailable. "We've got fires, Doc, the Chief's out," Tom Massey said. "Crazy night."

Outside the sirens continued to howl, some closer now, others still distant.

I wandered the house, ending in the kitchen. At the table, I found myself staring at the pictures drawn by Ellie's girls of star-flecked eruptions above stick figures standing in stubby grass. The girls hadn't wanted to draw them, and I gave them no crayons or markers to work with, just ballpoint pens and plain pencils; that may be why the pictures struck me as sterile, inanimate. There was no joy in them, no exuberance or vitality. I scooped them into a rough pile and turned it over on the table. The blank reverse of the topmost page was a reproach. What would Ellie say?

The chill began at the base of my neck and a thick, cold fluid flowed through my body, into my shoulders and down my spine. My fingers and toes tingled. I pulled a chair away from the table and sat, leaning forward to position my head below the level of my heart. I took a calm, deliberate breath.

I sat up slowly after a minute or so, when the chill had passed. I flexed my fingers and toes. Outside, the sirens had stopped. The house was quiet.

I could not simply wait for the phone to ring. I went out to the garage through the laundry room, taking the car keys from their hook by the door. I have no cell phone – Ellie tried to make me buy one, but the home-and-office phone arrangement has always been sufficient – and I regretted this for the first time. Driving to their house, I could miss a call telling me they were all right. But then I would know they were all right when I got to their house.

My night vision is not equal to Bobby Taylor's. I needed the headlights. Still, I moved through town without seeing a patrol car, or any other moving vehicle. As I moved along past one of our more affluent streets, a wide avenue of sprawling, turreted Victorians with deep lawns and carriage houses, the smell of burned wood hung thick in the air, and a pile of blackened curbside debris marked the site of one of the night's fires. A number of figures were moving in a very bright light, yellow jacketed firemen sifting through the ruin beneath the eye of a truck-mounted halogen spot.

I was a mile past the scene when I remembered that Helen Connelly lived on that street.

The light above the front door of Ellie's house was on. I parked in the driveway and hurried to the door, pushed the doorbell button. The bell chimed inside the house and after a half minute, I pushed the button again. The door had just a small frosted window, and the attached two-car garage had none. Ellie's thickly planted rose garden, a forest of thorns, presented a daunting

fortification beneath the living room's wide window, which was curtained at any rate.

At the back of the house was a broad wooden deck with a redwood picnic table, barbecue and outdoor refrigerator. As I stepped onto the deck a motion sensor light came on overhead. I could see that the doors to the downstairs family room and the basement were both closed. Behind the family room window, though, the curtains had been left open.

I could see the room clearly through the glass. There was no sign of disorder, no overturned end tables or broken lamps. I tried the door and found it locked. The basement door, to my surprise, opened when I turned the knob.

I turned on lights as I moved through the house, calling softly to Ellie and Pete. There was nothing in the basement, the family room or the downstairs bathroom to indicate violence. Likewise the living room, dining room and kitchen on the next floor.

Pete's car was in the attached garage, but Ellie's was not. I hurried upstairs to the bedrooms.

In each room the closet door stood open and the light inside was on. The closets were empty. Metal and plastic clothes hangers lay on the floor.

I left the house as I'd come in, through the basement.

While it appeared that the family had left of their own accord, their leaving had been rushed; I drove back to my own house hoping that another message had come in while I was gone, telling me they were safely away. I looked again down Helen Connelly's street as I passed. It was quiet now. The firemen and their light were gone.

I was turning off the street into my driveway when my headlights revealed a patrol car parked near the far end of the block. I cut the lights and put the car in park, but kept the engine running. The patrol car didn't move.

There were two new messages, the first from Dan Barry. Sounding utterly exhausted, he told me he was sorry about Nick, and about Helen Connelly, who had died tonight in a fire at her home.

"You know I hope you don't get this message, really," Barry concluded. "It would be good if you were out of town somewhere. Not that I'd need to know where. It's just... I'm sorry, Ed. I didn't believe it. I can't change it." There was a long pause. "I'm so tired." The recording cut off before he said anything more.

Now even Barry understood, poor man. Helen Connelly dead, too. Another domino, another obstacle removed. Pete Chase had spoken of sharks circling, and Barry was in the middle of the circle, wasn't he? Not one of the sharks, but surrounded by them. And look at all the blood in the water.

The second message was from Ellie. "Are you there?" She paused. "We came by, we looked for you. It's... Helen is dead. Dan Barry just called, there was a fire. You should be with us! And we know about Walter. Is that where you are? We're glad he's alive. But you, don't stay in your house. You have to leave right away. We all have to – "

The machine cut Ellie off, too, and she hadn't called back.

The medical kit was already packed, as always. I filled a small suitcase with clothes and a photo album Alicia had made and then walked through the house, closing and locking windows. I locked the back door, too, and the front door as I left. From the car I regarded the house and was grateful that the rhododendron, azaleas and honeysuckle did not need me to live. They had been nurtured by better hands and would endure.

My plan was to head north on Main to the nearest state highway, past the high school. I could reach the city in an hour. There I would check into a hotel and sleep, after which I'd decide how to proceed, whether to approach media or some legal authority first and how to present things in a credible way. No one would know me there; I'd have no identity or reputation. But such things are delusions after all. Forty years hadn't created anything for me that couldn't be destroyed by a pointed finger and a whisper or two. It's much more important that the story be sensational than the messenger credible, and that it plays on the moment's prejudice and fear. Real estate salesman, paper hanger, it doesn't matter who makes the noise. Point and holler. Seize a moment of public anxiety and tell people who's to blame for their worry. Identify the agents of disorder.

Maybe it would work for me as it had for them. Doctor nobody, a small town cipher. But lord did I have a story to tell.

Before I'd even reached Main a car appeared behind me, two blocks back. It soon closed to one block and as it passed beneath a light I saw it clearly. It was a police car, possibly the one I'd seen parked down the street from my house. The driver maintained his distance and did not flash his lights. I continued on to Main and turned north as intended. Quite near the high school a second patrol car emerged from a side street ahead as I approached and turned north, moving slowly. As I decelerated, the car behind moved closer. We continued north in increasingly tight formation, the car ahead slowing still more and the other crowding close to my rear bumper. We rolled to a stop after a few minutes of this. I put the car in park and waited. Less than a mile up the road, a pair of semitrailers rumbled by on the state highway.

Steve Hall emerged from the car in front and walked slowly back to stand smirking at me through my open window. The nightstick had returned; glossy black, it dangled casually from a

strap around his right wrist. I'd wondered where the son of a bitch had gone. Was he out here all night waiting for me to try the highway? The driver of the other car remained in his vehicle. His face in my mirror was bored, indifferent. I didn't know him.

"Medical emergency?" Hall asked.

I didn't reply.

"You have to go back to your house," he said, pointing south toward town with the nightstick. "There's some bad people around. You could get hurt."

I sat silent. The eastern sky was beginning to lighten; people would be up and moving soon. Even if no one came out this way from town, there could be southbound traffic from the highway at any time. Witnesses.

"Let's turn around and get you home safe," Hall said. "You follow the officer there and I'll follow you." He nodded to the other cop, then returned to his vehicle. The car behind me rolled backward and the driver signaled for me to do the same.

To discourage any thought I might have of making a sudden rush for the highway, Hall moved his car a hundred feet or so farther north, ready to crowd me into one of the deep ditches that paralleled Main on either side if I tried to pass. He didn't begin his own turn until the other cop and I were headed back into town.

My escape had failed. I was to join Nick and Helen, my death another tragic accident; or become, like Walt, the victim of a vicious and inevitably unsolved crime, in my case fatal; or perhaps I would commit suicide, like Donna Lombardi; or disappear entirely, following Kathy and John Dwight. The specifics were uncertain, but the end was not in doubt.

How to explain my calm? Since the moment Steve Hall's car appeared to block my route to the highway, I'd felt nothing of the fear that the situation should have engendered. By now, it would seem natural to feel that liquid chill on the back of my neck, and my hands and feet tingling. But none of it had happened. My thoughts were clear, my breathing regular. I felt, not near collapse, but intensely awake and alive.

This, I realized, was the sudden freedom from fear I'd seen many times in terminal patients, men and women who'd gone through their terror and emerged *ready*.

Ready for the end, yes. But also ready to fight it. They would sign on for experimental treatments, unfazed by the possibility of severe side effects; they would remain alive, fiercely, when no doctor could explain how it was done.

So what was I prepared to do? How would I fight?

There were twenty feet or so of road between my car and the one ahead, but I suddenly knew, beyond question, that that car didn't matter. In my mirror I saw Steve Hall perhaps a hundred

feet behind me, accelerating to regain his earlier position just off my rear bumper. As I watched he closed the distance by half, then drew nearer, still accelerating. The rising sun lit the side of his face. I could hear the engine of the patrol car, a proud mechanical roaring, as I hit the brake hard and held it to the floor.

Hall's mouth gaped and he twisted the wheel wildly to the left. I tensed for impact but he missed the rear of my car by inches and rocketed past, hitting his own brakes too late as his tires met the dirt shoulder of the road. His car smashed into the far side of the drainage ditch with a sound like thunder and vanished in an eruption of dirt and rock. Ahead, the roof lights of the other patrol car flashed and spun as its driver came around in a wide turn back toward the crash – I raced ahead and passed him, glancing once into my mirror to confirm that he wasn't going to follow, a leap of exultation in my chest when I saw flames rising from the ditch where Hall's car had disappeared.

Sirens began to wail as I parked at the curb a half block from the office. An ambulance passed at the end of the street, and I wondered if it was the one that had carried Nick Das. If it was, the people inside would work as hard to save Hall's life as they had Nick's. The practice of medicine is first and foremost about protecting and repairing physical systems; the personality of the patient is irrelevant.

This definition of my role had served me well throughout my professional life. And so I felt a bit of a fraud walking into the office of Dr. Edgar Mitchell on this new July morning, hoping fervently that the EMTs headed north on Main would find a man dead or dying of injuries I had inflicted – a man I had gladly left behind.

I called Ellie's cell number and got a recording telling me that the phone was unavailable. What this meant was unclear to me. Was the phone turned off? Thinking that she might phone in to her home number and check messages, I called the house and recorded what I had to say. I told her that I was all right, that I was staying in town but I hoped she and Pete had gotten out, and that they should stay out. I told her to tell the county D.A. everything, and to contact the national media.

"I've looked online, and they have no idea what's actually happened here," I told the machine. "The missing Town Hall is still news, but they can't say much except that it's still unexplained. Nothing about Nick, and only a reference here and there a teen crime wave and some fires that may have been arson. No one cares about Fred Wheeling naming himself mayor. No one sees things from outside like we've seen them here. You and Pete can make the connections. Bring the twins to see reporters, let everyone know you're pregnant, be refugees protecting your

children. It's not a time for subtlety, remember Wheeling at the high school."

I told her that I loved her and I hoped she would hear this message. I gave her the name and number of an attorney in the city and asked that she call him if anything happened to me. And I said goodbye.

If Ellie called in and heard the tape, that was all to the good; it didn't matter now who else might hear it.

Steve Hall did me a favor despite himself, turning me back toward town. I'm too old to be running from my home, no matter what's happened in it, no matter how lost I felt or disillusioned with the people I thought I knew here. If Ellie and Pete have escaped, maybe they can get people to look and to see what can happen when a community is frightened, when a sudden emptiness opens wide at your feet and swallows the certainty of things. Maybe the knowledge of what we've done – not just Wheeling and Murray but we who should have acted immediately and aggressively to check them and didn't – will help prevent it all from happening again in another town. Perhaps there will be resistance to the building of fences that hide unpleasant realities from view, to the easy assignment of blame for disasters that defy ready explanation.

Before leaving the office I sent an email to the managing editors of two major papers and the "News Tip" address of a cable news network. The message was short, as I had little time, but I hoped that urging them to contact Dan Barry might have an effect. Dan would do right if they spoke with him now, and if somehow he'd gone missing by the time they called, the few details I'd provided about other disappearances and deaths should be enough to make the vanishing of the local Fire Chief an intriguing story.

I locked the office door behind me. Sirens were sounding in all directions. I went back to my car for a moment and took the tire iron from the trunk, then walked four blocks in the clamorous night to where the Town Hall used to be. Rick Murray must have called out every car, because just one policeman stood guard before the high metal wall. I watched from the shadow of an old maple on the corner of Bell Avenue. He was leaning against the wall midway along its length, looking straight ahead. He didn't seem to move; it occurred to me that he might be asleep. I crossed the street quickly but without running and made it to the corner of the wall, where it turned past what had once been the main entrance of the building and the front stairs. The guard couldn't see me now.

I continued around the back of the wall, and in the glare of a halogen security light mounted on a short utility pole nearby I found a spot where two sheets of the corrugated metal came together. I worked the flat end of the tire iron between them, enjoying the irony; the light was meant to ensure that the wall was

not disturbed, not to assist in its breaching. I began working the metal away from the rivets that held it to the inner frame quickly, as quietly as I could. If the guard out front heard, it would be just seconds before he arrived to stop me.

There were sirens nearby now, a number of them. I imagined a gathering of forces at my office door, the sound of wood cracking and splintering, glass breaking from the window frames. They'd been to the house already, I felt sure. When they found the office empty, what would they do?

I doubted they would think to look here. Some would keep searching pointlessly around town, and others would no doubt be assigned to watch the highway ramp. But inevitably the search would wind down and the guard detail would return to this place. And here I would be. Inside the wall.

With a creak of protest the metal sheared away from a rivet just above eye level. I dropped the tool I'd been using and pulled at the detached section of wall with my hands, wincing as the edge sliced my flesh. When the space I'd opened looked big enough I stepped forward and slipped through.



What did I find as my eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the wall? What did I face as I stood inside the mystery at last, fingers torn, breath ragged, eyes burning with sweat?

Precisely what I knew would be there. A hole. A night-black nothing. A void and a pit. On the main street of my town, in the heart of the place I had lived very nearly my entire life and where I had witnessed the births and deaths of many people but known so few, on the site of what had been our government, our law, our symbol of community, a great emptiness. The abyss.

I stared ahead into darkness, the light outside reaching just a few feet beyond the gap I'd torn in the roughly circular wall; I stepped carefully forward until the pit gaped cold before me as a deeper blackness, a nothing with its own awful gravity, and looked down into what was surely a grave large enough for us all. This was my thought, with Kathy and John already taken, and Nick and Helen and Donna and who knows how many others; maybe Walt by now, exchanging bullets with men who'd come to his house looking for me. Push us in with squad cars and SUVs, pile us like cords of wood. The number of bodies doesn't matter; if the hole goes deep enough, we'll fit.

Sirens converged outside, their shrieking loud as anything I'd ever heard. Car doors slammed, voices barked. Someone had seen me, perhaps, or the guard had heard my noises after all. No matter.

To reach me they will have to come inside the wall. They'll need to open it wider, let the light in. They will have to face the abyss too, face the fact of it, and I know they don't want to or the wall wouldn't exist. I'll wait.

I don't intend to take any more of them with me. But there's no question that I'm going, myself.

One more domino, trembling before the fall. Hoping to be the last.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Henry Marchand's fiction has appeared in *The Seattle Review*, *The Willow Review*, *Rosebud*, *Elysian Fields Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He is the author of *Writing Short Stories*, a high school text, and essays published in *The Boston Globe*, *The International Herald-Tribune*, and *Common Dreams News Center*. A New Jersey native and longtime resident of northeast Ohio, he lives with his family in Allentown, PA and teaches creative writing at Cedar Crest College. He is perhaps the only baseball fan who equally supports the Cleveland Indians, the New York Yankees, and The Lehigh Valley IronPigs.